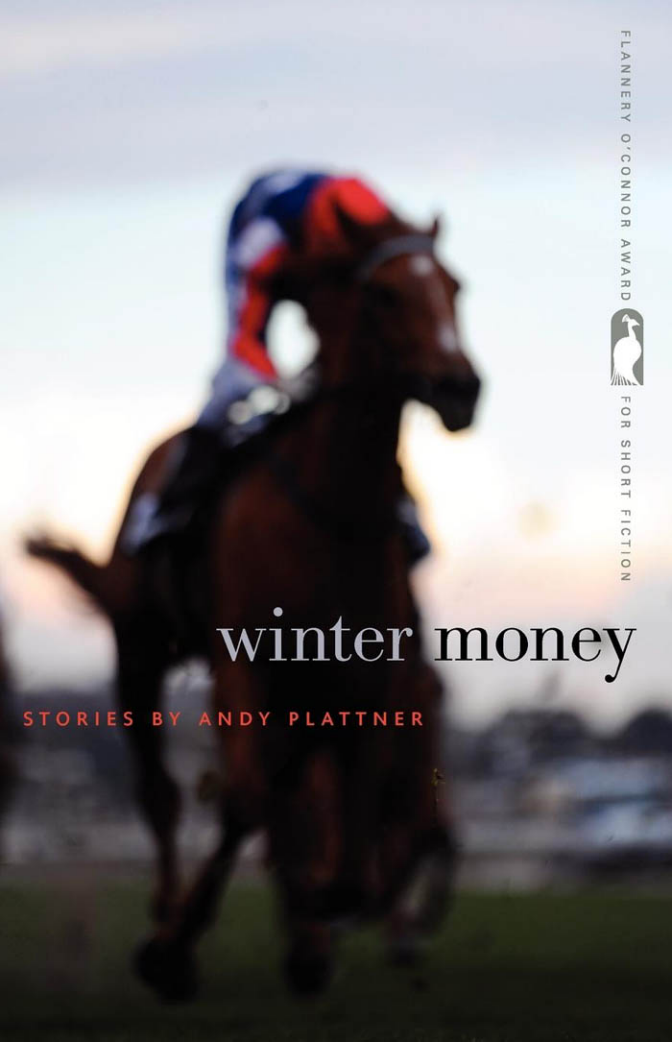
FLANNERY O'CONNOR AWARD
FOR SHORT FICTION
winter money
STORIES BY ANDY PLATTNER

VISIT…

Winter Money

WINNER OF THE FLANNERY O'CONNOR AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

Winter Money

Stories by Andy Plattner

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For Rick Barthelme and Rie Fortenberry and my glory days at the Center for Writers

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Winter Money

I've been thinking about Tampa. I'm standing by the window of my room, 203, here at the Hightop Motel in Tomaston, Kentucky, holding the curtain back, watching the sky turn to ash. It's been like this all week. Tomaston has been a bad spot for Amanda and me. I would be surprised now if it didn't rain. Tampa wasn't much of a town for horse racing, but we had it better there.

Amanda doesn't want to go back. She says it would take too much money to rebuild her racing stock, money neither of us has anymore. She wants to take what's left of her horses to Big Chimney Park, a grimy bullring in eastern West Virginia, try to win a race or two there, then unload them. After that she isn't sure what she'll do. Amanda's not a big planner. It's the reason she's never going to get anywhere in this business. It's also the reason she's become pretty good at just getting by.

She told me about West Virginia last week.

"What happens after you get rid of your horses?" I said. She shrugged. It's not as if she would ever think of finding work outside the racetrack. She could find work again back at the track in Tampa, which is what I suggested, but she doesn't want to do that. No more Tampa for Amanda. Tampa is where we met, where we were success-

ful, so I know the problem she has is with me, not some city in Florida where we were happy once.

Something isn't right between us, but I think it's something I can fix if I can show her winter money. Winter money in my pocket means we can go to Florida and rebuild her stock. She can run them when she wants to, not when she has to, and I can find mounts for Grovey on my own time. Amanda and I could get a room back in our old place, the Buccaneer Inn, a motel that's got a little polish to it. Winter money is what we sorely need. I'm not saying Amanda can be bought, but she can be persuaded, and that's one of the things I like about her.

I'm standing here waiting for Grovey to call me back. I've phoned his house three times in the last hour and his girl, Donna, says he's not home. She's lying. She's eighteen years old. When Grovey tells her she's the only girl for him, she believes it. He's probably sitting over in his La-Z-Boy laughing every time she hangs up on me.

Grovey and I have never been friends, but we work well together. He was nearly washed up when I took over his book three years ago. We met in the White City, a cowboy bar in Seward, Nebraska. At the time I was laid up myself, having busted a knee for good when a bull named Monster Man rolled over on me in a rodeo in Great Axe. I needed a job that would let me keep my feet on the ground for a while. He had nothing to lose in getting me for his agent—someone who would talk him up a little with the horsemen. He hired me with a handshake.

Grovey and I went from one track to another, starving a little along the way until we came to Gaspirilla Park in Tampa, which is where I met Amanda. Grovey caught fire there during the winter meet last season. He said I was finally getting him some live mounts. He said the girl must be doing some good. It was a funny thing for him to say.

I was surprised he let me talk him into coming to Old Latonia, the track here in Tomaston. He is forty-four, old for a rider. Most jockeys that age would've been content to finish out their professional days under the sun in Florida. My idea was that we shouldn't settle for

anything just yet. Good riders can hang their tack anywhere they please, and I saw Grovey taking us right off this soulless circuit, which is where we seemed to have been since we started. When I went to talk to Grovey about Old Latonia, he lit a cigarette, cocked his head, and said, "Why not?" Grovey wasn't the hard bastard I always thought he was. He still had hope for the future, which made him different from most journeymen riders I knew.

Old Latonia is a new racetrack. Why they call it Old Latonia, I'm not sure. Marketing maybe. I read about the big purses they were offering for the inaugural meet and figured we'd make twice as much as we did in Tampa with half the effort.

I had to talk Amanda into coming along then, too. She's been around horses since she was a kid and didn't seem interested in improving her outlook, which probably explained more about the racing business than the *Racing Form* ever could. She'd had a good meet at Tampa, too, but it only made her want to stay there. I promised her things about winning and the future and myself. I don't know what she believed exactly, but when I drove north with Grovey in the Oldsmobile, she was following behind in her pickup, pulling a four-horse trailer, singing along with the radio, smoking cigarettes a mile a minute.

Nothing has gone right since then. The Oldsmobile quit running right before we got to Lexington. It was a car I had barnstormed all over the country in, but there it quit on me. It was four in the morning, and I was driving along with Amanda's lights just tiny specks in the rearview mirror, and the electricity went out in my car, but I don't know how. The lights went and the radio went, and when I tried to ease onto the shoulder I didn't know where it was, and Grovey and I ended up going down onto a grass median.

Once we stopped, I tried to make a joke of it. "You should've been driving, I guess," I said to Grovey.

He wasn't shook up, but he didn't say anything for a minute. Amanda never saw us, drove right by. I guess it was like we disappeared. "Not a good sign," Grovey said. He lit a cigarette.

Amanda said she got concerned after a while when she couldn't see us, but she had no choice but continue driving to Tomaston. There were the horses to consider, she said. I ended up selling the Olds to the guy who towed it, and Grovey and I caught a bus for Tomaston. Amanda already had the stalls bedded down and the horses unloaded by the time Grovey and I got to Old Latonia late that afternoon. I've been borrowing her truck since, and I generally don't like relying on other people for my rides.

Then, as it turns out, the track here was deep and tiring, and Amanda's horses needed more time to get ready for a race, and for a while her patience was thin and she took it out on me. Once she had them fit, they couldn't win. Competition here was tough. A lot more horsemen than I expected had read about Old Latonia.

Grovey started off riding pretty well here, but then that two-year-old flipped in the gate with him, and it laid him up six weeks. He hasn't won a race since he started up again last month. Along with everything else, my money has been running out. I gave Amanda a thousand two weeks ago to keep the feed man off her ass, and it just about left me tapped. The feed man told her he might be able to forget about the bill for a while if she'd let him in her pants. Amanda hadn't exactly made up her mind what she was going to do about this until I loaned her the money.

An hour ago a man named Kirk called here and told me what we had planned for tomorrow was all set. I need to talk to Grovey, though. That's what Kirk said, "Have you talked to your rider yet?"

"All set," I said. Kirk hung up.

I didn't mind lying to Kirk. All I knew about Kirk was that he was the man setting up this thing tomorrow. He'd called me a few times during the summer offering me a shot at making a small killing at the mutuel windows, if I could get my rider to go along with what Kirk had planned for a certain race. I had always turned him down until this last time.

Grovey must sense what is going on. He's been riding too long not to know how things are, long enough to know panic, which is what he surely must've heard in my voice the last time I talked to him. I'm standing by the window still looking at the sky, occasionally letting my eyes fall to the empty parking lot of this motel.

At a quarter to six the phone rings. It's Donna. "Grovey says he'll see you at seven over here," she says. She laughs. "How was that?" she says away from the mouthpiece.

"I'll be there," I say and hang up. I go to the window again and pull back the curtain. I hope it will go on and rain for a while.

I don't know what Amanda will think about this. She knows that sometimes the result of a race is decided before it is run, and as long as nobody is messing with her horses, I guess she doesn't mind it. Race-fixing is also a kind of habit, something like whiskey, I guess, because there's a point where you start relying on it to get you by. Amanda really doesn't like to rely on anything.

As long as I can show her the money, nothing will matter. We'll forget all about Tomaston and the Hightop. When we first came here, we lingered in our room, made love as often as gifted teenagers, and talked about our plans for the winter. From here we wanted to winter either in Hot Springs or New Orleans. We haven't been to either place. It doesn't feel so bad thinking about it. I'm thirty-three now and don't think much about places I've never been, just places I have, and what went wrong there. So thinking about Hot Springs doesn't hurt so much.

Amanda pulls into the parking lot in her pickup. She gets out and begins to walk this way. I go to the bed and lie down. She doesn't look at me when she comes in. She drops her cloth purse to the floor. I close my eyes as she takes a step towards the bed. In a second I feel the mattress give a little down to the left of my feet. The springs whine as she shifts momentarily. There is the sound of a boot dropping to the floor, then another whine and shift as the other boot hits the carpet. She seems to take a deep breath. I feel a tug on one of my sneaker laces. I open my eyes. Except for a band atop her forehead, her shiny

black hair is tucked under a white bandana with a blue design on it. There are clear pearls of tiny perspiration under her eyes, extending across the bridge of her nose. She stops and looks at me. "I thought of you today," she says.

I lift my head up. "That's a good thing," I say.

She undoes the laces of that shoe and throws it on the floor. "Are you guys riding anything tomorrow?" she says.

I drop my head back to the pillow. "Grovey's got one in the fourth," I say.

She starts on the other shoe. "Should I bet?" she says, pulling off the shoe.

I close my eyes again. "Save your money," I say. She pinches my calf and I open them again. She is looking at me like she sees something she hadn't before. "I'll take care of making us money," I say.

Amanda curls up beside me. "You're up to no good, I know that," she says.

"Let me worry about it."

"It's not going to change anything," she says, dropping her head to my shoulder.

"We'll see," I say.

Donna and Grovey live in a light-blue row house on Cullen Street, about ten blocks from Old Latonia. Grovey hates hotels. He met Donna in the track kitchen, where she was ladling gravy over biscuits. She has a round face and sparkling blue eyes. She's a little on the heavy side, but it doesn't matter to Grovey. He likes young girls.

She opens the door to me. I walk in. "He's in the kitchen," she says. "You missed a button on your shirt." I walk past her. The wood floor is dull and dusty. It smells like they have a dog living in the house, though I don't think that they do.

When I get to the entrance of the kitchen, Grovey is sitting at a small table in the center of the room, his back to me. There's a big box

of cornflakes at his elbow. He's sitting on the edge of the chair, his feet barely touching the floor. I walk in and take a chair across from him. The bowl in front of him seems huge. He takes a spoonful and looks at me. His face cracks a little as he chews.

"How's the shoulder?" I say.

He nods and extends his right arm out, wincing as he does it, which I think is for my benefit. The spoon in his hand drips a little milk to the floor. He brings the arm back to his side, pushes the bowl away, then sits back in his chair. "How many mounts did you get for me tomorrow?" he says.

"Just the one," I say. He nods and reaches in his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

"We've seen better days," he says.

"Yes, we have."

He lights the cigarette with a butane lighter which was tucked in the pack. "So, what's the problem?" he says.

"I think everyone thinks you're riding scared," I say. "No agent in the world can talk people out of that."

Grovey shakes his head. "No, I didn't mean that," he says. He looks at me. "And, I'll tell you what, son, I've never rode scared in my life. You ought to know that by now."

I shrug. "I don't know, Grovey, it just seems like you aren't as aggressive, you know. Like you were in Tampa."

"Fuck Tampa," he says. "That's history." He cocks his head to the kitchen door, which is held open by a wood slat, and calls for Donna. He looks at me again. "Why are you here?" he says.

"I need you to do something for me tomorrow."

"What makes you think I'll do anything for you?"

"You owe me one," I say. "I got you on your feet again."

He laughs and looks around the kitchen. "I owe you this," he says. "I owe you this," he says, pointing his lit cigarette at the box of cornflakes.

"Well?" I say.

"I know what it is," he says. "You don't hold your troubles in so good." He faces the kitchen door and calls for Donna again.

"So what's it gonna be, Grovey?"

He leans forward and flicks a cigarette ash in the cereal bowl. "I'll do it," he says. He looks at me. "But you and I are through after tomorrow."

"All right," I say. I didn't expect him to say this. I thought he might want to go back to Tampa, too. "Here's what you do," I say. He holds his hand up. I hear steps coming to the kitchen door.

"Come on in," he says to Donna when she stops in the doorway. She looks at me and walks over to his side. Grovey puts an arm around her behind. "Okay, tell me now," he says. "Say it in front of the girl. She needs to know what a big crooked world it is." Donna looks at me and smiles.

Amanda is up at five-thirty the next morning, without using an alarm. She has a clock in her head where the horses are concerned. I listen to her shuffling around with my eyes closed. She sits up in bed for a minute, then picks up the phone and dials a number. "Time to feed," she says quietly. She hangs up and walks into the bathroom. The shower goes on. Amanda wants her horses fed every morning by six, and she calls her groom, Polly, a girl who Amanda says enjoys a vigorous nightlife, to make sure it gets done on time. The shower goes off. The next thing I know, Amanda is curled up next to me in bed, soaking wet. I don't mind at all.

"I'm leaving the day after tomorrow," she says before she gets up again. After I hear her leave, I fall asleep and don't wake up until ten, when I hear the maid's cart rolling outside the window.

I get up, dress, and head outside. I stop by the front desk to buy a pack of cigarettes. I walk outside, light one, and head across the highway to the Big Boy on the other side of the road. The sky is still gray. It starts raining once I'm inside. I sit in the Big Boy for two hours

smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, watching it rain, trying not to think about anything.

At half-past twelve I walk to the pay phone, flip through the yellow pages, call a Powerline Cab, and stand for twenty minutes in the entrance of the Big Boy waiting for it. When the cab pulls up, the driver honks and I walk out in the rain and get in. The cab is red and white and has a Powerline decal with bolts of lightning shooting out on both sides. The driver is a young black man who says his name is Ted. He has a short Afro and is wearing thick eyeglasses.

When we get to the track, I give him five dollars for valet parking. We pull down to the valet station, and I tell Ted to tell them he is going to wait for me. They wave him to a spot up front. "I'll need a deposit if I'm going to wait for you," Ted says after he turns off the engine. I pull out a twenty and toss it up to the front seat. Ted picks it up and looks at it. "What, do you have something in there you like today?" he says, nodding to the grandstand. I tell him what race and what horses to bet on, but that's all I tell him. He turns off his meter and I get out of the car. He strides up alongside me after a second. "Is this a sure thing?" he says, looking down at me. He has a broad face with a lot of tiny bumps along the jawline.

"Yes," I say. We go inside. There's a tote board hanging right above the entrance. Fourteen minutes to post. Under RACE, it says 4. "I'll meet you under this board after the race," I say. Ted nods.

I head for the farthest end of the grandstand. There's hardly anybody there. Some men are standing together in a half-circle laughing. The air feels damp. I get to the corner of the grandstand and walk a little way out on the landing. The rain has stopped, and now there's a thin mist coming off the blacktop where I stand. A few feet away are an older man and woman sitting in lawn chairs with their legs crossed, staring out over the track.

In a minute the horses are on the track, riders up, for the post parade. Grovey is atop the three horse, a horse he isn't going to let run today. I watch for a minute, then go to a pari-mutuel window and bet

all the money I have on the three horses in this race the riders are going to let run. I bet all the perfecta and trifecta combinations I can and end up standing at the window for a few minutes, which is a long time for a gambler to stand in line. It looks suspicious because the people around you know you're betting a lot on something, something you might know that they don't. Kirk told me to spread it around—go to five or six windows—but I don't feel like it. I'm leaving Old Latonia for good. He can answer the questions. I get all my tickets in a stack and put them in my trouser pocket. Ted is standing thirty feet away, leaning against a pole, watching me.

Grovey came through. He had that poor horse all over the track. The others in on it had yanked the run out of their mounts by the time they reached the far turn. The three riders dumb to the fix let their horses roll, and they finished 1-2-3. Just like Kirk said they would. I watched Grovey gallop his horse back to be unsaddled, and he shook his head when the groom said something to him. He dismounted and walked through the mud to the paddock and back to the jock's room. He had his winter money too, now. He told me last night he was going to stay here for a while. He pulled Donna a little closer when he said it.

Ted is smiling broadly when I find him standing under the tote board. "Easy," he says.

"Let's go," I say. He follows me out. There is a woman selling purple flowers wrapped in white paper outside the turnstile. There are women like her who stand outside every track I've ever been to. People who are lucky betting like to spread the winnings around. It's not a well-kept secret. I think about buying a bundle of flowers for Amanda, but that would probably make her suspicious. I don't know if it's this way for everyone, but with people like Amanda and me, doing something extra, like buying flowers, means you've done something wrong or are about to do something wrong.

We get in the cab and drive out. "How much did you make?" I say to Ted. He is smiling in the rearview mirror like he knows something.

He's got some money in his pocket. Money will put a man in a good mood. It's the hope of the world.

"Where to?" he says.

"Let's take a drive," I say. "I want to see this town again before I leave. I'm leaving soon."

"I figured that," he says. We head for town, going past the Hightop on the way. We stop at a drive-through and buy a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a six-pack of Olde English 800. Ted drinks the first can with one long bend of his elbow. "That's the thing I love about driving this cab," he says, throwing the can on the floor of the passenger side. "You never know when you're going to find a passenger running over with good luck."

"This is a high time for me," I say. I need to do this, drive around and blow some money, imagining this to be a cab ride that's going to take me someplace important.

"They're building out on the west side," Ted says as we pass one house after another, a small movie theater showing *Fantasy Island,* two blocks of small business shops, then one house after another. "Want to see it?" he says.

"Sure," I say. I lean back and take another drink from the bottle. I imagine Grovey and Donna pushing a shopping cart down an aisle of the Timmons we pass out on the highway. This place has beat us bad.

We drive to a spot so far out I can barely see the town in the distance when I turn around. Ted pulls onto the shoulder and turns the engine off. We both get out. Ted points to a big blue sign with white letters in the middle of an empty field. FUTURE HOME OF GABRIEL ELECTRONICS, it says.

"They start building here next spring," Ted says. "I'm going to be here for it." He points to a spot in the sky where he imagines something to be. "Me and another guy were out here when they put up the sign. I think I'll try to find work here after it's built."

"There's something," I say, nodding.

"Maybe the next time you're here this won't be just another field with

a billboard on it," he says. "There will be men working and plenty for all of us to do."

"It sounds like something worth waiting for," I say.

We don't make it back to the motel until it's dark. "What do I owe you?" I say to Ted as we pull into the parking lot of the Hightop.

"Forget it," he says. He opens his fourth can of Olde English.

"See you," I say. I get out of the cab. He honks the horn and laughs. I shut the door. He heads out. There is a light on in my room as I walk toward it.

There's an open suitcase on the bed when I unlock the door and come inside. Water is running in the bathroom. The television is on, but there's no sound. I take the money out of my trouser pocket, thirty-six hundred and change—"Someone must've smiled on you today," the teller said as he cashed it—and stick the money under a stack of panties in the suitcase. When I stand straight up again, I notice the room smells like perfume. Amanda walks out of the bathroom. She is wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt with no brassiere underneath. Her hair is in a ponytail.

"Do you remember this?" she says, holding a clear square bottle in the air for me to see. It is nearly full. She sprays a little in my direction. I shake my head. "You bought it for me last winter."

I don't remember. "So why do you have it on now?" I say.

"I found it in the suitcase. I wanted to be special for you tonight."

"What makes tonight any different?"

"Well, I'm leaving in a couple of days and all."

I hold my hand up to her. "Sit down for a second," I say. "Sit down and look in your suitcase there." I point to the stack of panties. She reaches over and tips a corner of them up. She lets go and sits down on the bed.

"Tampa," I say.

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "I can't win there anymore. I think I can in West Virginia."

"It's cold in West Virginia."

She looks at me and blinks. "My horses are going to West Virginia," she says. I turn and take a few steps toward the television set. I try not to think of horses and riders, hotels and cabs.

"I'm going to Tampa," I say, though I know Tampa will not be Tampa without Amanda. This is what I have to show for my plans. A girl in a motel room sitting next to a suitcase.

"I won't go with you," she says.

"I know," I say. It is quiet. Other than meeting some has-been rider in a beer joint out on the prairie, I don't remember how I got involved in horse racing. I think this could be the end of it and I could just take my money and head out into the world to try my hand at something else. Earlier tonight I saw a sign out in a field that seemed to hold some promise for one man. I wonder why I am not like that—I have such little hope for things I can't control. "I guess I sold my soul today," I say.

"At least you got something for it," Amanda says. I turn around. She is lifting the corner of the panties again.

"Maybe," I say. Maybe I would end up being the kind of man who would have to fix a few more races before it was all over with.

She looks at me. "Come with me," she says. "You won't have to make any plans. You can't fail then."

I look at my shoes. "Grovey fired me today."

"You'll find another rider," she says. She lets the panties fall back again. "It won't matter for a while." She crosses her legs and looks up at the ceiling. "That money will last longer in West Virginia than it would most places," she says, looking back at me and smiling.

"That's one way of looking at it," I say. I try to guess how long she and I will last. Maybe as many nights in a cold town in West Virginia as thirty-six-hundred dollars will buy. Maybe it will be enough. Amanda pats her hand on an open spot on the bed, and I'm glad nothing will be up to me for a while.

Visitor

My mother was from Philadelphia. She moved to Steelage, West Virginia, with my father after he graduated from Villanova. Steelage was my father's hometown. My mother was a few credit hours short of getting her diploma, a result of her cutting classes in the spring term of her senior year after she found out she was pregnant and going to marry my father in June. What she did instead was sit on the lawn of the Theta house and laugh and drink wine with her friends. She thought she could pick up the hours again when she and my father moved away from Steelage, which they never did. I don't think my father promised her anything specifically about leaving Steelage because he was not a man who made a lot of promises, which, in a way, was a good characteristic of his.

My mother's parents were Jerry and Martha Wells. We went to visit them every Easter in the blue station wagon my father borrowed from the Schultzes, a big family of Catholics who lived five miles down Route One from the firehouse where my father and Mr. Schultz and a few other men gathered to play cards once a month. My mother's parents were quiet people. They lived in downtown Philadelphia on Oregon Avenue in a tremendous building called Yardley Towers. They

looked quizzically at my father and my sister Grace and me whenever we came to visit, even after we had been going to see them for years. Grandpa Wells and the three of us would sit out in their living room with our legs crossed while Grandma Wells and my mother did things in the kitchen with Grandma Wells doing most of the talking.

The people of Steelage looked at my mother like her parents looked at us—that is, uncertainly—though as it turned out, my mother would live in Steelage for over forty years and knew more about the town, who lived there, whose boy went to what school and so on, than anyone who was born there. She wanted to get along because there was a lot of Steelage in my father and it was the part of him she seemed to understand the least. That was always my family's problem: caring too much and understanding too little about one another, and I imagine it was why, when my father finally lost our farm to First Mountaineer National, they chose to stick together, moving to a foldaway row house on Henecy Street in North Steelage. It was after we lost the farm that I chose to leave Steelage, which, upon reflection, was neither a good decision nor a bad one, just something to keep my hopes alive, whatever they happened to be at the time.

The story I am getting to happened twenty years ago, when I was a freshman at Steelage City College and we—my mother, father, sister, and I—were living in the small house on the farm.

The land was always too much for us, I know that. My father had bought the biggest place he could find, as much West Virginia as he could. There were ninety acres all told. We never did anything with the land: my father sold used cars off a lot in Huntington.

Grace had been home a few months, returning after Del Thomas, who she had run away with, left her high and dry for a job with a horse trainer heading for Birmingham, Alabama. Del had been in the class above me at Westover County High, and Grace was five years older than him. He had long hair that hung in his eyes. He didn't know much. He was just a kid when he and Grace ran off to Charles Town.

Del liked to gamble and they went to the races every night. He and Grace blew up after they ran out of money, which we all knew was going to happen.

It took something out of my parents when Grace ran away. They weren't good about hiding their emotions. My mother would be sitting at the dinner table and start crying for no reason, and my father would become angry because there was nothing he could do about it. It was hard on both him and me watching my mother sob over her plate, knowing it didn't have anything to do with us.

When Grace returned, everything calmed down. Grace herself was so quiet and agreeable, not her nature, my mother and father didn't know what to do with her. They'd try to talk about it and not talk about it. Grace said Del was coming back. "It's not important," my father said. I believed Grace.

One evening I caught a ride home from football practice with Early Moyer. The sun was nearly gone behind the Cramer's farm when he pulled up in front of my house. I was riding in the bed of Early's pickup with two other linemen. I jumped out. "See you tomorrow," they said.

"All right then," I said. I watched the truck pull away, then walked to the front door. I took a minute to take off my cleats. My mother didn't like the sound of cleats on her floors, let alone the mess they made. When I opened the front door, I saw the kitchen table was set and there were plates of food in front of three empty, turned chairs. I walked into the kitchen and stopped when I saw Grace standing with her back to me. She was facing the back door. A few feet in front of her and to the right, my father stood at the back door. From behind the screen door, Mr. Kohl, a neighbor of ours, was aiming the barrel of a shotgun at my father's head.

"What's this, Daddy?" I said.

My father didn't turn, but he said to Mr. Kohl, "Joe's here now, Tim. Are you going to pull the trigger on a man with his only son in the room?"

"To hell with your family!" Mr. Kohl said. "To hell with you, Mitch! You got a life too damn easy for me anyway."

My father shook his head once, slowly. "This isn't an easy life at all." I was surprised. My father had a quick temper and normally was the type of man who would yell back at someone who was aiming a gun at him.

"You're standing on solid ground here," Mr. Kohl said. "You're safe here from everything."

"What the hell do you have on your mind?" my father said.

"You know what that is," Mr. Kohl said. "Don't act ignorant now."

"Shut your mouth," my father said. "You don't talk to me like that when I'm standing in my house with my children behind me."

Mr. Kohl closed his eyes and the barrel of the gun shivered in the air. "I've lost my farm. You were my friend."

My father put his head down and ran a hand over his newly-sawed crew cut. He noticed Grace. "I don't want you standing here watching this," he said. Grace stood still. When I looked back at Mr. Kohl, I saw he was pointing the gun at my sister.

"You better watch what you're doing," my father said to him.

Mr. Kohl quickly aimed the barrel back at my father. "I wasn't pointing at her. I was just looking at her."

"You just look right here," my father said. "Right here's as much trouble as you're going to find."

"Look, Mitch," Mr. Kohl said. He stopped and drew a breath. He looked at his shoes. My father pushed the screen door open to him. Mr. Kohl was a forty-year-old man with a thin neck and brown hair thinning at the crown of his forehead. He was wearing a light brown windbreaker and sweating badly. He swung the barrel of the gun in the air, then wiped his forehead with the arm of his coatsleeve.

"Come in and sit down, Tim," my father said. Mr. Kohl started past Grace and me, through the kitchen, and found a place for himself on the sofa. My father started to follow, then stopped in front of Grace and said, "Get Mr. Kohl a glass of tea."

I followed my father out to the sofa. Mr. Kohl said, "I thought I was going to do it, Mitch. I didn't want to come over and make a fuss and not do it. I did think about it, you know."

"I'm sure you did," my father said. "These things need to be thought about."

Mr. Kohl nodded his head. "How's football?" he said to me.

I shrugged. I was still in my uniform, pads and all.

"Joe's going to start against St. Elgin's, " my father said.

In a moment Grace came over with a glass of tea in her hand. Mr. Kohl took the tea from her. "Thank you," he said. He laid the shotgun on the floor and looked around the room like it was the first time he'd seen it, though he had been in our house many times. He'd had coffee with my father and me at our kitchen table before the three of us drove to Morgantown and watched the West Virginia–Eastern Kentucky game. When we got there, we bought general admission tickets and wound up sitting high in the stands on the visitor's side of the field. Mr. Kohl snuck a bottle past the entrance gate and we all drank out of it. West Virginia rolled over them.

Mr. Kohl took a long drink of tea. "You do live simply, don't you, Mitch?"

"Have to," my father said.

"I'm sorry about all this," Mr. Kohl said. He took another drink of tea. He rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth.

Grace leaned over to my father and said. "What about Momma?"

"What's happened to Momma?" I said.

"Nothing. She got a little excited when she saw our visitor here, that's all," my father said. He looked at Grace. "See to her, will you?" My father turned and stared at the shotgun on the floor. Grace walked out of the room.

"Did Momma see him?" I said, nodding to Mr. Kohl. I took a step towards him. Mr. Kohl's eyes grew larger.

"No harm, Joe," my father said. "Your mother saw him aiming that gun at me." He nodded to the floor when he said "gun," then looked

at Mr. Kohl. "She ran out of the room. She won't sleep tonight, but she'll be fine." He seemed to be talking to Mr. Kohl.

Grace returned after a minute. She answered before any of us asked. "She wouldn't open the door," Grace said.

My father nodded. "It'll be fine," he said. "I'll go see her. It'll be fine." Grace and I stood there. It was quiet for a moment. My father nodded to Mr. Kohl. "So what will be your plans now, Tim?"

"I don't know," Mr. Kohl said. His expression was blank. "I'll stay here, though. I wouldn't know up from down anyplace else." By "here" I knew he meant Steelage.

"That's the truth, isn't it?" my father said.

"If my Pop was alive, he'd cry in shame," Mr. Kohl said.

"You don't know that," my father said. "He might be proud of you holding on as long as you did."

Mr. Kohl smiled. "That's a nice thought," he said.

My father was looking down at the shotgun on the floor again. "I wish I could've helped you, Tim. I'm just making payments myself." Mr. Kohl nodded.

Mr. Kohl wasn't the only one in Steelage who thought my father had money. My father had been a fairly famous football player at Villanova a long time ago. Success is such a random, infrequent thing, when you have it once, people hold you to it forever. But my father had never been able to get much for his football ability: his knees were already going when he finally tore one up for good playing in a co-ed touch game the day before he graduated, a week before he was to sign with the Cleveland Browns, the team that had drafted him. What my father had brought home from Villanova was bad knees and my mother, and they had seen plenty of financial hardship since.

* * *

Mr. Kohl left after a while, and when he did he put the shotgun under his arm and shook my father's hand. "I'm glad I wasn't the kind of man who could do it," he said.

"That's fine now," my father said.

After Mr. Kohl left I stood at the screen door and watched him walk down Lower Sixteen Mile. My father went to see about my mother, and Grace started clearing off the table. When Mr. Kohl disappeared in the twilight, I walked into the kitchen. She smiled at me. "Goddamn, those uniforms are ugly." She nodded. "Stand there and talk to me and I'll make you some dinner." She scraped a plate off into the garbage pail, then put it in the sink. "How was practice?"

"Okay," I said. I was a freshman. Playing football had never been something I had enjoyed as much as it was something I had just done really. I did like the hitting, though. My father came to watch me play every Saturday. That part of it was all right, too. My mother came with him sometimes. Once, I saw them holding hands.

"What about Momma?" I said.

Grace didn't look up from the skillet she was scouring. "We were finishing dinner," she said. "There was a knock on the back door. Daddy went to get it. When he didn't come back to the table right away, Momma went to see what was keeping him. She saw Mr. Kohl and his gun and she ran out of the room." Grace lifted the skillet out of the sink, dried it, and set it on the stove. She walked to the refrigerator and took out a package of pork chops. "I bet he won't be able to talk her out of it this time." Grace nodded in the direction of my parents' bedroom. "I bet this is it." She took the chops out of the package and laid them in the skillet, bent over and turned on a burner.

In a minute, the door opened down the hall in my parents' room. My father came walking towards us. His bad knees made him a step slower than most men. It hurt to watch him.

"See if I'm not right now," Grace said softly.

My father nodded to me after he stopped a few feet from the stove. "Pork chops are good tonight, Joe," he said. I nodded to him. He looked at the chops cooking in the skillet. "We've had some excitement here tonight," my father said. The pork chops popped in the skillet. Grace leaned against the counter and lit a cigarette.

"Grace was telling me about it," I said.

"It was all right," my father said. "Kohl was drunk was all. Tired and drunk."

"You were real cool," Grace said, looking at the skillet. "I imagined him shooting you." My father ran a hand over his head. Grace went to the stove and turned the pork chops with a fork.

"How's Momma?" I said. "Did he point the gun at her, too?"

My father smiled. "No," he said. "Just at me."

"And me," Grace said.

"Is everything all right now?" I said, looking at the floor because my father'd smiled a hurt smile when Grace said what she did.

My father shrugged. "You know your mother," he said. I hoped I did. She wanted to leave Steelage. She had talked about leaving Steelage since I had been old enough to understand what it meant, what it could mean. My father had always been able to talk her out of it. Steelage was about the only thing in this world my father understood. I didn't know about this, though. A man and a gun.

My father reached in one of the big pockets of Grace's skirt and took out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one, shook the match, and threw it in the garbage pail. The three of us stood watching the skillet. I guessed we were all thinking there were going to be some changes needed somewhere, like most people would after something potentially bad had happened.

"We need to start locking the doors," my father said.

Grace laughed. "Good idea."

"What's funny?" my father said.

"You can let me have a laugh," Grace said. My father threw his cigarette in the sink.

"Mitch!" my mother called from the bedroom. My mother had a low, lush speaking voice and most times I just liked to hear it, though what she had to say certainly wasn't always pleasant. My father walked down the hall and stood in the doorway of his and my mother's room. He stood and listened and nodded his head once.

"Don't act happy when he says we're moving," Grace whispered to me. "Just say, 'Oh, well, Daddy, that will be fine. We will be fine wherever we go.'" I nodded. My father was still standing in the doorway with his hands in his pockets. I thought about Philadelphia, about Yardley Towers, living a few floors above Grandma and Grandpa Wells, where I would be able to look down to the street and see city girls walking in two's and three's. I would spend Easter in Honolulu, Hawaii.

My father came walking back down the hall. He stopped a couple of feet from Grace and watched her move the skillet from the live burner to a dark one.

"Any change in anything?" Grace said.

My father turned to her. "Change in what?" he said. "Your mother is fine. She will be fine." He tilted his head. "What did you mean by that, Grace?"

"Nothing," Grace said. She took the chops out of the skillet and set them on a clean plate. She took the plate over to the sink and set it down next to a plate that hadn't been washed yet. The plate had a pork chop bone on it, a half-eaten baked potato, and a serving of green beans. Grace picked up that plate and scraped the beans from it onto the plate which had my pork chops on it. She took my plate out to the dinner table and set it there.

"What do you think you're doing?" my father said. "Don't give him leftover beans."

Grace turned to him. "They're not leftover, Daddy. Momma just made them an hour ago."

My father walked out to the dining room table and looked at the plate. He touched the beans with the knuckles of his right hand. "They're cold," he said. "Ice cold."

"I don't care," I said. He looked at me and shook his head once.

"I didn't ask you," he said. "You're not eating these." I took a couple of steps toward him. He held his hands on his hips. I walked to the table and sat down in front of the plate.

"What're you doing?" my father said. He leaned over and picked up the plate off the table. He held it out to Grace. "Make him some fresh beans," he said.

"No," she said. "Beans are beans. Warm or cold."

I reached up to take the plate from him. I was hungry. I didn't care. He pulled the plate to his chest. One of the chops slid halfway off. He turned and walked to the kitchen. He went to the garbage pail and tilted the plate over the can. He said something that had the word "beans" in it and tried wiping them off the plate with the back of his hand. A couple of beans fell into the pail. My father shook the plate and everything went into the can. He stood straight up and shook the plate again. Then he hit it on the counter and the plate broke in two. It cracked all the way to the part he was holding in his hand. He dropped the pieces in the sink and turned and headed for the front door. He put his hand on the knob, tried to pull it. His hand slipped. He put both hands on the knob and for a second I thought he was going to tear it off, which he could've done. He turned the knob hard, swung the door open, and walked out.

Grace hadn't moved. I had stood when he broke that dish, but that was all I'd done. Grace was looking at the drops of blood on the kitchen floor now. I thought she was going to say something smart like she was prone to when things got tense in the house, but she didn't.

* * *

I helped Grace clean up. She took a dishrag out to the front door and wiped the blood smear off the knob and the few drops that had followed my father to the door. I went to look in the garbage pail. There was blood in there. I picked up the whole white plastic bag, tied it off, and took it out to the garbage.

Grace and I did the dishes together. She made us coffee and I ended up having that for dinner. "Why don't you take those pads off?" she said as we sat at the kitchen table. She lit a cigarette. I shrugged. I didn't want to get up. I hated taking off my football uniform. Every

night, pulling off my jersey, undoing the laces on the shoulder pads and all that. It made me empty. I usually ended up sitting on the edge of my bed looking at my hands. I wasn't ready to face that yet. I had just wiped up some of my father's blood.

Grace and I stared at each other. "When you heard that knock, who did you think it was?" I said.

"I'm going out that front door one day," she said. "And it won't be alone."

"Not tonight though," I said.

"I don't know. Maybe Mr. Kohl and I will elope later. Mr. Kohl and me and his shotgun." She laughed loudly at that. I did, too.

"Were you nervous?" I said.

She didn't answer for a second. "I guess I was," she said.

"Did you think he was going to shoot Daddy?"

"No, I didn't. Kohl and Daddy are friends. I thought he might shoot me, though."

"Why would he shoot you and not shoot Daddy?"

"I don't know, but that's what I thought. I stood there and I thought, now watch this drunk son of a bitch shoot me instead."

"You're getting an attitude," I said.

She shrugged. "Maybe. It's just when I stood there and looked at Mr. Kohl, I was thinking, all right now, something is going to happen here, something that is going to change everything. I could hear my heart beat." Her eyes opened wide and became moist. I could tell she was tired.

"When do you think you'll be leaving again?" I said.

She looked in the direction of the front door. "It won't be long now," she said. "I'll be out of here again before you know it."

I nodded. I would be glad when she would be gone, when both of us would be gone.

"Joe, go to bed now!" my mother called from her room.

Grace grinned. Neither of us had any idea our mother could hear us talking. I stood up.

"See you tomorrow," Grace said.

I turned and walked into the kitchen, but instead of turning again for the hall, for my room, I stopped and looked at the back door. The hills were black, the sky purple, and somewhere out there was my father. And Mr. Kohl. They were walking the countryside, maybe looking lost to strangers, but they were men who knew where they were headed. I wanted to wait up for my father to see if his hand had stopped bleeding, knowing it probably would, and to see if this changed things, though I figured it hadn't.

A World Record in Bay St. Louis

I had two options after high school: go to work for my father as a salesman, which was what he wanted me to do, or become a horse trainer, which was what I wanted. College was no option. I did poorly in school and hated my time there. Pop had only completed two years of high school himself. He had to get a job to help support his family, working on beer delivery trucks and moving up the ladder. He wound up a millionaire, the owner of a beer distributorship in northern Kentucky.

He also owned a few racehorses. They were trained by an ex-jockey, Jeremy Donnemeyer. After my junior year of high school, I worked for Jeremy in the summer. I was a groom. I cleaned stalls and learned how to look after the legs of a racehorse.

Though Pop was pissed at me for choosing the racetrack over his company, he gave me one of his horses for graduation. It wasn't a good horse, just some six-year-old Jeremy couldn't win with named Stilts and Kilts. This horse was getting pounded in three-thousand-dollar races at Jewell Green Race Course, a racetrack in Cincinnati where Pop ran all his horses.

Right away, I put Stilts and Kilts on a trailer and we headed for Big Chimney Park in West Virginia, where they ran races for as low as

fifteen hundred dollars. I got Stilts and Kilts to win two races from five starts there, then sold her for $2,200.

I was on my own for good. I went to Randall Park in Cleveland and paid three thousand bucks for an honest old gelding named Gold Watch. He won four races for me and I was able to buy another horse. I kept building. I was back at the barn twelve hours a day; when I was away from it I wondered if I was missing anything.

Pop sold the beer business six years after I left northern Kentucky. He got good money for it. He'd just celebrated his fiftieth birthday and said he was sick of wearing suits and answering to brewery reps whenever they came to town. Pop wanted to dress in a sweat suit and tennis shoes and drive his 450 SL around.

My parents divorced after he sold the beer company. Mom said he was in the house all the time and really letting himself go. She was forty-nine then. "I don't want to be married to Ed McMahon," she said. My parents had been together over twenty years and there had been a lot of good times in there. Towards the end, however, things got a little crazy. Once, Mom took his favorite ice-blue sweatpants outside and ran over them with her car.

Mom and Pop reached a financial settlement without ever going to court. Regardless of how angry they were with one another now, Pop would rather have broken bread with an axe murderer than toss one slimy dime to a lawyer.

After things were settled, Mom moved to Louisville, which was where she was from originally. She bought a two-story house on Romarin Avenue and started going out with a dentist named Clyde New, who she said played a steel guitar every Tuesday night at the Dallas Room.

Pop and Mom had one bad incident after the divorce. It involved a collection of souvenir Kentucky Derby glasses. They had brought a mint julep glass back from each Derby they'd attended together. Mom left the glasses with Pop after she moved to Louisville. They were

highball glasses with a commemorative design and so on. You paid $5.75 for one on Derby Day at Churchill Downs, though that price did include mint julep—sugared, diluted bourbon poured over crushed ice. Anywhere outside the Downs you could get a Derby glass for a buck and a half.

Mom called Pop and asked if he could mail the glasses to her; she was having a Derby party. They'd collected sixteen over the years. "Everybody will get a different year," Mom said to him. "It'll be fun."

This aggravated Pop. "That collection is worth money," he said. "We didn't save them for party favors, you know."

"Oh, come on," she said. "They're not museum pieces."

I was living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, at the time, training a few runners at Ivy American Park. I got calls from both of them concerning the Derby glass controversy. I gathered the rest of their conversation had gone something like this:

"Hell no, Dotty. Those glasses stay in my cabinet. Let your friends drink from plastic."

"I'll send them back. I'll replace anything that breaks. It's a party, Charles."

"Suppose I'm having a Derby party?"

"When did you ever throw a Derby party?"

"You're just trying to take a dig at me with these glasses."

"Don't be small-time about this, Charles. You send the glasses, fine. You don't, the hell with it. The hell with you."

Pop mailed the glasses the next day. He stuck a note in one of them. "Have your party," it said. "Nobody stays in the house on Derby Day."

The Derby Day races began around eleven in the morning and they were always televised by a local Louisville station. In the Derby parties I'd been to, the host or hostess always had the station covering the Downs tuned in. Somebody at the party might've had a bet going and wanted to watch a particular race. Somebody else wanted to see all the wild Derby hats. A film crew would get to the fourth floor of the club-

house and there'd be politicians and cut-rate celebrities from canceled TV shows shaking hands and giving autographs.

What Pop decided to do was run a filly he owned named White Label on Derby Day. Besides the big race, there were normally nine or ten others, ranging from hundred-granders down to purses of twenty-five thousand. Pop didn't have a horse in his barn that could win for more than five thousand at Jewell Green.

He called to tell me about entering White Label. "You call your mother," he said. "Tell her I have a horse in the second race on Derby Day. Tell her to watch."

"Pop. . . ."

"You run your horses, I'll run mine," he said.

After the line went dead, I called Jeremy Donnemeyer, Pop's trainer. "What in the hell are you all up to?" I said.

"Shit," Jeremy said. "It's not my idea. Your old man says run and we run. I can't get a jock down there to ride, so I'm bringing Erwin Clay along."

"That guy's a fucking bum," I said.

"It's the best I can do," he said.

I called Mom and we did our how-are-yous. I told her Pop was running a horse on the Derby Day card, second race.

Her end of the line was quiet for a minute. "What's he up to?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe you should leave your TV off."

I watched the Derby Day races that year in an off-track betting parlor on the east side of Harrisburg. I'd finished my work at the barn and hotfooted it over to the OTB in my old Chevy.

The second race from Churchill Downs had a purse of forty-two thousand dollars. There was a full field of twelve going. On the odds-board, White Label was 90 to 1.

At the break, Erwin Clay blasted White Label to the lead. He was whipping and banging on her like the finish line was only a few yards

away. They actually held the lead for about twenty seconds as the field raced past people jammed along the inside rail.

The other horses closed around White Label entering the turn. For a few moments it seemed like she was moving backwards. Then she was dead last and there was three-eighths of a mile left to run. Erwin Clay kept whaling away on her. I felt like strangling him.

I called Pop that night. I was drunk and highly pissed at him. When he answered, I could tell he'd been drinking. "Pop," I said, "that was a disgrace."

"Hey, you little shit," he said, "don't fucking talk to me like that. I can make the lead in the big time, don't you forget it. I am big-time. You people better know it."

Mom called me very late that night. The last guest had left her house and she said the party had gone okay. She sounded like she'd been drinking, too.

"I hope you don't treat your horses that way," she said.

"I'm surprised you watched it," I said.

"I was married to him for twenty-four years."

"Maybe you shouldn't have worried about those glasses," I said.

"That jockey ought to be suspended."

"He will be," I said. "He was riding on Derby Day for the first time in his life. He lost his mind."

"It was terrible."

"I know."

"Did I stay married to him too long?" she said. "That's the problem with the whole thing. You don't know where the end is. It's like going down a dark hallway."

"Mom," I said.

"I wonder how many years I've wasted," she said.

"Mom."

I met Elvy when I was twenty-seven years old and training four horses up at Finger Lakes in western New York State. She was the

hostess in the clubhouse, a tall blonde with slender, willowy legs and placid blue eyes. When one of my horses ran better than expected, I'd go up to the second floor of the clubhouse. They had a crummy little dining room with a bar over in one corner. Up there, I was always confident and enthusiastic. After the last race of the day was run, Elvy would drift over to the bar as the other patrons cleared out. We'd talk about books and cable channels she liked; she'd tell me about riding up to Niagara Falls with her friends and how they would laugh at all the sappy couples there. I took Elvy back to the barn area and showed off my horses. She loved them. We went out for dinner, then back to the motel room I rented by the month on Euclid Avenue. She was a fantastic lover—all legs, all night.

When I decided to ship to Tampa for the winter, Elvy went with me. A lot of trainers liked to head south for the cold months. Sunshine Downs, the Tampa track, always had big fields and I'd end up running against somebody dropping a better horse down in class so he could win a purse. In the middle of February we shipped up to Birmingham and Great Southern Park. The purses weren't as good as Sunshine's, but the competition was lighter.

Elvy helped around the barn because I couldn't afford to pay any extra help. She was a hotwalker, and after training hours she helped clean equipment and mix feed.

I was startled by her enthusiasm. "All those years of watching races," she said. "Listening to the horse people and all their bullshit. I feel like I already know things."

After a month's time, she wanted to be a groom for one horse. That meant going into a stall and working on the animal's legs; treating cracked heels, sore shins, whatever. I had no reasonable objection to this idea, but I did give her the gentlest horse in my barn—a mare named Kelly Go Fast—to work on.

At first I'd go into the stall with Elvy and point out the various problems Kelly Go Fast had and how I'd been treating them. When a

few days passed, she stopped me as I was ready to walk in the stall. "Let me do it," she said. She kissed me on the cheek.

I'd be working in a stall next to Kelly Go Fast's and hear Elvy talking to her in this soothing way. It was sweet. And Kelly Go Fast did win a race at Birmingham before we shipped north for the summer. Elvy had her picture taken in the winner's circle, holding the horse's bridle and giving a thumbs-up sign.

Detroit Race Course was the next place we hung our tack. It was another stop on the pothole circuit, but Elvy and I were happy and the horses did well there.

One day in early June, Elvy came walking down the shedrow, holding something small in her hand. She was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, hair pulled back in a bun behind her head. Best-looking groom in the hemisphere.

I stopped raking the shedrow. She held out a card. It was laminated and had her picture in one corner. At the top of the card it said "Licensed Trainer."

"Surprise," she said. "'Member last week when I said I wanted to borrow the car so I could go back to the apartment and take a nap? I went to take the trainer's test. Guess what?"

"You passed." I smiled. "What does this mean, you're firing me now?"

She laughed. "Nah. I just wanted to see if I could do it. For fun."

About a month later she bought a horse, a five-year-old gelding named Mr. Corn Flake. She paid three grand for him. I wasn't shocked Elvy had that much money; she was pretty good at cribbing away the old cash.

I was right there in the winner's circle with her after Mr. Corn Flake won his first race. It was a fifty-five-hundred-dollar race and he won it by a long neck. Two weeks later Mr. Corn Flake won a ten-thousand-dollar race. Elvy and I celebrated that win at a place called Starcher's, off Napoliatano Boulevard. A waitress brought our drinks

and took our dinner orders. When she left, Elvy leaned forward and said, "I feel like hopping up on this table and letting you get all over me right now." She held her glass up and I raised mine. "I'm gonna take Mr. Flake to Chicago next week," she said. "I've already got a race picked out."

"Run him for ten here," I said. "Pile up the purse money."

"I want to swim in the big pond," she said. "You come with me."

"I'll just get oompa-loompas to look after my horses," I said. "Elvy . . ."

"I know what you're gonna say," she said, grinning. "You're gonna tell me about your dad running that horse on Derby Day. Believe me, baby, this isn't the same thing. I can feel it." She held up her glass again. "I'll ship down the day before the race and be back the day after."

Mr. Corn Flake ran fifth for sixteen thousand five hundred in Chicago, finishing about mid-pack. When Elvy got back, she was as excited as I'd ever seen her. "You should go with me next time," she said. "The barn area's cleaner than the neighborhood I grew up in. The infield grass is emerald green."

"I thought you said your horse ran fifth," I said.

"He was just starstruck," she said.

Elvy made three trips to Chicago that summer. Mr. Corn Flake followed that fifth with a third, then a second. In September it was time to figure out where we wanted to go for the winter. Elvy campaigned for the Fair Grounds, which was a nice track in New Orleans. I was thinking about Birmingham. One of my runners, Silver Signal, had put together a small winning streak, mainly because I'd kept him in the cheapest races at Detroit I could find. "Silver Signal's just getting good," Elvy said. "He'll kill them in New Orleans." She wasn't trying to con me—New Orleans sounded like a terrific time. I got a little excited thinking about Silver Signal running well there.

We shipped to New Orleans.

Mr. Corn Flake won his first race at the Fair Grounds and with the money she got for this, Elvy bought another horse. She was one of the few women trainers at the Fair Grounds. The *Times-Picayune* included her in an article about the tribulations of being a woman in a man's sport.

Silver Signal ran poorly at the Fair Grounds. I didn't know if it was the track surface that bothered him or if the jocks I picked to ride him didn't know what they were doing. The truth was, those horses in New Orleans were just too fast for Silver Signal and the rest of my stable. I trained them the best I knew how and tried to find the easiest spots for them to run in. That was the problem with big-time tracks: there weren't any easy spots. My horses managed one lousy third from nine starts during the month of December.

One night after a second-place finish by Elvy's newest acquisition, a three-year-old colt named Creamcakes, she took us to an oyster bar in the French Quarter. Elvy was in a terrific mood. I had a plate of fried shrimp in front of me. "I'm thinking of taking my horses to Birmingham," I said.

Elvy had a bowl of gumbo and a bottle of Coors Light in front of her. The shape of her face changed when I said that.

"It makes me crazy when my horses don't do well," I said. "You know that." I picked up a shrimp.

"Things will change," she said. "You'll get the hot hand."

"This place isn't for me," I said.

"I'm doing well," she said. "It isn't right for you to ask me to leave."

"I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm simply telling you I'm seriously thinking of shipping to Birmingham for the rest of the winter."

"Come on," she said. She held up her hands.

"I want to be a horse trainer on my own terms," I said. "Where I do it doesn't matter to me."

Elvy was quiet and it wasn't difficult to see she was growing angry. "Well," she said, "it's your move."

The next day I called the stall man at Birmingham. "Yeah," he said. "We got room for your four horses." He laughed. "We got room for four hundred."

I drove to the liquor store and got some empty bourbon boxes. I went back to our apartment on Gentilly and set the boxes along the wall of our bedroom. When Elvy came home from the races, she sat on the edge of the bed and stared at them. "You're serious," she said. "I can't believe it."

The boxes stayed empty for a few days. I didn't know what I was hoping for. I ran a horse and he finished ninth. After I cooled him out, I sat on a bale of hay in the shedrow and drank a six-pack of Olde English 16-ounce cans. People didn't change the things they wanted from this life in a few days. Elvy wanted to see how high her star could go, and I wanted to be able to make a living at work I liked doing. I couldn't see any way to bridge the gap between us.

So I went back to our apartment and began filling the boxes. I called a horse van company and told them to put me on the list for the next trailer heading east.

Two days before I was scheduled to ship out, Elvy and I were sitting at our small kitchen table, having lunch. The table was quiet except for the sound of newspaper pages turning or a celery salad being crunched. The air in the apartment was dense and it felt like I was sitting inside a closet.

I was looking at the *Times-Picayune* sports section and something on the bottom of the front page hit my eye. The headline there said *T. L.'s Blue Shooter Goes for Record Tonight.*

The story was about a greyhound that was about to break the world record for consecutive number of victories. He was running at Bay St. Louis Downs in Mississippi.

"Check this out," I said to Elvy. The bottom of the page dragged across a sunlight-colored Jell-O square she hadn't eaten yet, leaving a swizzled trail.

She glanced at the front page. "Just tell me what it says," she said.

I brought the paper back and studied the headline again. "There's a dog that might break a world record tonight."

Elvy pushed her lips forward and nodded. "Amazing," she said.

"Come on," I said. "You know all the things that can go wrong during a race. There can be a bad start, traffic trouble, loose footing, anything. Superman can turn into a bum. There are a million ways to lose."

"They don't feed those dogs all day," Elvy said. "They chase a metal rabbit. The one who's the hungriest wins. It's got nothing to do with talent."

"It says here this T. L.'s Blue Shooter has won thirty-six races in a row. Now how can that be anything but talent?"

"Don't start taking anything out on me," she said. "That's all I ask."

"This isn't about that," I said. "If we were on our honeymoon, I'd still be interested in this dog."

Elvy stirred her coffee. She left her spoon in her mug and pushed at her bangs with her fingertips. "This is crazy," she said. "You love me and I don't know why you're doing this."

"I'm gonna drive over to Bay St. Louis, wherever the hell that is, and watch this dog. I want you to come, too, Elvy. It's history in the making."

She smiled thinly. "I'll pass, I guess."

"All you're gonna do is sit here and watch *Biography*. I'll be out of here soon enough."

"Look . . ." she said.

"You look," I said. "I came to New Orleans because you wanted to. I'm leaving and you can go on with your life. I want this to be civilized. It's not gonna be like my parents. All I'm asking is that you ride over to Mississippi with me to watch this race. I really want to go out in style."

Elvy's eyebrows had sharpened while I talked. She set her elbows

on the table and leaned forward. "I guess you aren't asking for that much," she said.

"Thank you."

"Asshole," she said. She got up and headed for the bedroom. She closed the door.

I got on the phone and called information for Bay St. Louis. I dialed the dog track number and asked for directions. The woman at the other end told me it was a half-hour's drive from New Orleans. "Are you a reporter?" she said.

"That's right," I said. "All the big stories."

I went out and slept on the living room couch a while.

Around three, Elvy and I rode over to the Fair Grounds together for feed time. It was something we always did. We went to the tack room and began setting out buckets. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to talk to you that way."

"Are you still going to the dog races tonight?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm really interested. I can't explain it, I guess."

"I'll go," she said. "I want to see, too. I want to see something that can win thirty-seven races in a row." She looked at me.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," she said.

We left for Bay St. Louis around six. It was already dark out. It was chilly. Elvy brought along bottled water and a pimento cheese sandwich. She wore a beige down vest and a bright red sweatshirt. Elvy said, "You don't have to pack everything, right? If you leave something behind and discover you need it after all, you can call me."

"Okay," I said.

Bay St. Louis was easy enough to find. There were billboards with streaking dogs and dollar signs once we crossed the Mississippi state line. They said You Are Only Fifteen Miles From, then You Are Only Ten Miles From.

When we pulled into the parking lot, white lights shone down on the small dog-racing oval. A couple of TV vans, one from Mobile, the other Biloxi, were parked outside the compact clubhouse. A banner over the clubhouse entrance read See World Record Tonight.

I paid for me and Elvy to go inside and as I went to buy a program she wandered over to some glass doors. The program said the big race was the seventh. Dogs were being paraded onto the track for the second as I went outside to find her.

Elvy had found a bench out on the asphalt apron between the racing oval and the clubhouse. I sat next to her. Each dog wore a different colored cloth around its rib cage. Number one was red; two, blue, etc. The dogs were led over to the starting box and loaded one by one. There was muffled barking and whining. A steel rabbit, held out from the rail by a three-foot-long metal arm, began winging its way down the backstretch. When it made the turn and zipped past the starting box, the doors flew up and the dogs took off.

The four dog, a muddy-brown thing whose head rose and dipped like he was doing the breaststroke, opened a long lead about halfway down the backstretch and after that the others never got close to him. The rabbit stopped halfway around the turn past the finish line and a net went up to catch the dogs.

"This is the craziest thing, just sitting out here in the middle of nowhere," Elvy said.

"I feel like somebody in *Close Encounters,*" I said. "Drawn to that mountainside for no good reason."

Elvy smiled and dipped her head. "Dah-dah-duh-duh-dah," she said.

"Let's go inside and have a drink," I said.

"Let's have two," she said.

We discovered a bar alongside some betting windows. We ordered a double bourbon over ice apiece. We went back outside and sat down. Elvy sipped at her plastic cup, then set it next to her hip. My drink tasted good. "Well," she said, "if you go, I'll miss you."

I nodded. "Elvy, you're gonna make it big. I'm gonna be sitting in my tack room at Bumfuck Downs and there you'll be, on the cover of the *Racing Form.* You'll have a Triple Crown horse, the whole thing."

"It's my turn to be a good trainer for fifteen minutes," she said. She put her fingers on the back of my arm. "Your time is coming."

"Don't patronize me, goddamit," I said.

"Hush," she said, taking her hand away.

When it was time for the seventh, a glow came from inside the clubhouse. Light careened out to where Elvy and I sat and we turned. It was TV camera lights. The dogs were in a runway, separated from onlookers by a glass partition. They were being filmed as they were led out to the track. The cameras followed them. The procession of dogs stopped near the finish line. A man from the public address system announced each dog's name.

T. L.'s Blue Shooter was the seven. He was fawn-colored and looked like an average greyhound. There were larger and smaller dogs standing out there with him.

In the program, an entire page listed the thirty-six straight races T. L.'s Blue Shooter had won. He'd been everywhere: Iowa, Florida, Indiana, West Virginia. There was a "1" in the finish column for each of these races. I held the program out for Elvy to see.

"'It doesn't seem possible," I said.

"It doesn't seem real," she said. We looked out to T. L.'s Blue Shooter standing near the finish line.

The dogs were led over to the starting box. They were placed inside and the yipping began. Suddenly the apron was crowded with people. The steel rabbit came careening around the bend and the doors of the starting box went up as the rabbit hit the straightaway. The dogs flew forward and one wearing white went to the front, followed by another in green. T. L.'s Blue Shooter was mid-pack, and went very wide around the first turn. The dog wearing white widened his lead as the field went down the backstretch.

"He's not going anywhere," I said.

"We jinxed him," Elvy said.

When the field hit the final turn, T. L.'s Blue Shooter began to accelerate. He sailed past three dogs and was quickly lapped on the leader. The public address announcer was shouting, the crowd hollering. T. L.'s Blue Shooter went with the leader for three strides, then blew past him. He won by daylight. Bulbs were clicking and people were cheering.

"Wow," I said.

"Wow is right," Elvy said. "Jet pack." Her eyes were bright and she looked at me in a serious way. "Would it make a difference if you had a dog like that? What would you do with him? I really want to know."

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I'd pick my spots, you know. Try to keep the streak alive for as long as possible."

Elvy crossed her arms and smiled suddenly. "Not me," she said. "I'd take on all comers. I'd take that dog to the moon."

T. L.'s Blue Shooter was extracted from the net that caught the dogs and led back to the finish line by a handler. People applauded and the animal stood very still. A man holding a microphone stepped onto the track. He began talking, but the amplification was bad and what he was saying came out all fuzzy.

I left New Orleans with my horses two days later, as planned. I did all the things a man who's moving was supposed to do. I set boxes in the bed of my truck and on the drive from New Orleans I tried to think of better days ahead. My horses just needed to get their confidence back.

I was training at Birmingham all of three days when I realized I couldn't stand being there. Nothing against Birmingham—it was all my doing. I'd look at my horses and think, why in the hell couldn't you fuckers have run any faster? Then I felt rotten about being angry with animals.

I decided to sell the lot of them and start all over again. Their records were weak and no trainer at Birmingham was interested. Finally, through the racing office, I found a guy who had a farm twenty miles from the track. He was just some old farmer with teenage daughters who wanted to learn to ride. He came to my barn and checked out my stock.

"These horses seem fine," he said.

"These are thoroughbred horses here," I said. "You have to handle them a certain way."

The man grinned. "I had my first horse when I was fourteen, chief. Nothing about them will surprise me."

He paid me twenty-two hundred for the lot. For the moment, I wasn't even a trainer anymore. I didn't care. I went back to my motel room at the Morse Pines—$45 per week—and was ready to call Elvy. It was evening now. I looked at the motel lot; there was a VW bug across the way with a fender ready to fall off. I thought about the things I wanted to say to her. Using a motel room phone for a long-distance call, that was just money out the window, but I wasn't worried about it.

Elvy answered on the fifth ring. I hoped she'd be sitting right there by the phone, waiting for me, but as the phone rang, I understood she was going to be mad. "Elvy," I said. "Hey, it's me."

"I'm sitting here by myself," she said.

"I screwed up," I said. "I'm sorry."

"You left me alone," she said. "Your horses couldn't run worth a damn so you deserted me."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Say it again," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"When are you coming back?" she said.

"Right now, if that's okay," I said. "I'll be in New Orleans by midnight."

"Come on," she said. "I'll wait for you that long."

After I hung up I was ready to go. I thought of my father for some reason and found myself picking up the phone again. It was about 8 P.M. his time and he sounded groggy. "Where are you?" he said.

I didn't feel like going into all the details. "New Orleans, Pop," I said. "Elvy's in the other room, sleeping."

"What do you need?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. "I was just thinking about you. I was thinking about the time you ran that horse on Derby Day."

There was a pause on his end. "Yeah, that." He made a sound. "That's a strange thing to think of," he said.

"Well," I said, "I just wanted to tell you I was sorry for yelling at you about it. The horse didn't belong, but I made things worse. I didn't understand."

There was another pause. "I barely remember it," he said. "You're too young to be living in the past."

"Okay," I said.

"Hey, look," he said, "when are you gonna come up and spend some time with your old man? Come on. Come tomorrow. I'll buy you a plane ticket."

"Now isn't a good time for leaving New Orleans," I said. "We'll stop by to see you on our way north this spring. We'll probably spend the summer in Chicago."

"Chicago," he said. "Stepping up in the world."

Elvy and I did spend the rest of the winter in New Orleans and her horses won seven races all told. I groomed for her a while, then she loaned me eight thousand bucks to buy a four-year-old mare named Lafayette Leslie, and I had a horse of my own to head north with. I was feeling lucky and looking forward to Chicago.

We stopped by northern Kentucky to see Pop. Elvy and I spent the night in my old bedroom, which was strange and interesting, and I

thought about all the nights I'd slept there wondering what my future would be like.

Pop watched the big TV downstairs until early in the morning. He'd told us he'd finally decided to get out of the horse business, that it had taken away too much of his money. I guessed Elvy made Pop nervous. He was always offering her something to drink or eat, and when she'd say, "Sure, I'd love a beer," he'd just sit there. I'd be the one to get her a beer.

In the morning I woke up before Elvy and headed downstairs. Pop was sitting at the kitchen table, looking as if he'd slept well. He had a plate of eggs and a cup of coffee in front of him. His face looked longer and his hair was getting scarce. I was a dead ringer for him—everybody said that. "I want to show you something before you guys leave," he said.

"Want me to get Elvy up?" I said. It was early and I could hardly think straight.

Pop smiled. "Let her sleep. This is a special thing. Men only."

"Yeah, okay," I said.

In a minute we were riding through the dark, milky air in his Mercedes. The engine wheezed at first, then made a clicking noise. As he drove, the odd sounds slowly disappeared.

Pop elbowed me and leaned over in an exaggerated motion. "We're going to see Jeremy," he said.

"Your trainer? I thought you said you didn't have any horses going."

"I don't," he said.

Jeremy Donnemeyer, ex-jock, now ex-horse trainer apparently, lived in a small brick house in a Cincinnati suburb called Avondale. It was a chilly morning and Pop's heater wasn't working well.

Pop knocked on Jeremy's front door twice. "He isn't going to be up," I said. "Jesus."

"Nonsense," Pop said. "All racetrackers are up at the crack of dawn, right?" He elbowed me. He knocked again.

In a minute the door did open. Jeremy stood there in jeans and a flannel shirt. It didn't appear that he had been sleeping. He held a freshly lit cigarette in his hand.

"Who do you got there, the Director of Racing?" Jeremy said.

I nodded to him and we shook hands. "How's it going?" I said. He smiled. His hand felt like an SOS pad. Jeremy was a short man and his face was cracked from years of riding. I'd never seen him off the racetrack grounds. It was weird to think he even owned a house.

Pop pointed at me with his thumb. "I brought him by to see Big Boy."

"Sure," Jeremy said.

To my left was a small dining room. There was an oblong black table and four chairs. A place setting was at each chair. Jeremy must've been watching me. "I like keeping it that way," he said. "It's nice. Basement's this way."

He led us down a short hallway and pulled open a door. The three of us went down a creaky staircase. Jeremy's basement was a rec-room thing. A small refrigerator was against one wall, along with a couch and TV. Something was on the couch.

"Big Boy," Pop said.

The thing on the couch raised its head. It was a bulldog. Its fur was white and brown and I moved closer. Its eyes blinked furiously.

Jeremy snapped his fingers twice. "Jump down," he said.

Big Boy got down awkwardly from the couch. He sat and looked up at Jeremy.

"Where'd you get him?" I said.

"He's mine," Pop said, clapping me on the back. "Mail order, Wichita."

Big Boy snorted and made a noise like air squeaking out of a balloon. We all just stared at him a second. Big Boy was heavy, his legs stubby and thick. He continued blinking.

"Vet says the operation to help with his breathing's gonna cost eleven hundred bucks," Jeremy said.

"What?" Pop said. He paused. "There's no way. Positively, no way."

"It's what the man said," Jeremy said. He brought his thumb and index finger to his nose. "It's a bad breed. Hard for them to get air. Whenever Big Boy tries to get some exercise, he collapses."

"I want to call that vet right now," Pop said.

"Vet's not gonna be there this time of morning," Jeremy said.

"Well then I want his phone number," Pop said.

Jeremy nodded. "I keep all that stuff right by the phone in the kitchen."

Without another word, Pop turned and headed for the steps. Jeremy took a draw from his cigarette. After Pop was gone, Jeremy said, "He kept Big Boy at his house at first, but the thing started having problems right away. It drove your dad nuts. He wanted to have something around, you know, but I guess he didn't realize." Jeremy leaned forward and patted Big Boy on the head. "Bulldogs can't even hump, did you know that? It's too hard on them. They're bred artificially." Jeremy looked at me and shook his head. "I really don't mind looking after Big Boy at all. Your old man pays the bills. I get so much for looking after him. Don't even have to leave the house." Jeremy flicked the ash from his cigarette away. "I've been trying to teach Big Boy some shit, but all he knows right now is to jump up on the couch and jump down."

"He can jump up?" I said.

"I help him with that," Jeremy said.

Big Boy continued watching Jeremy. Big Boy snorted and his round eyes were all watery. Jeremy watched him. Big Boy continued to sit, waiting for Jeremy to tell him what to do next.

Chandelier

I was standing on the slick concrete floor of the barn hall, smoking a cigarette, waiting for Clement. It was four-thirty in the morning and the dew on the roadside grass leading to the barn sparkled in the moonlight. Clement said he'd be here at five, but I hoped he would be here sooner and we could get this thing done. It was cool outside and when the wind eased through the barn, it hardly felt like May.

The Queen of England was coming next week and I was sorry it wasn't going to mean much. She was going to visit some of the horses she'd been boarding at Indigo Farm five miles from here. Then she was supposed to go to the races at Lexington Fields the following afternoon. Her itinerary had been listed in the newspaper. Horse farms failing all over Kentucky and the Queen was coming. I'd lost mine and was about to move to Miami where I had a job selling speedboats.

I dropped the cigarette to the floor and touched the coal out with the toe of my boot. I walked down the brightly lit hall past a series of stalls on either side and opened the door to the tack room. I turned on the light and just stood there for a minute trying to warm up. Back at the house this morning I was going to make coffee, had gotten out the tin of grounds, but then stood at the sink and cried.

In the tack room now, I regretted that scene at the sink even more.

It had simply come out of nowhere and afterward I wiped my face with a tea towel and felt like a fool. And I hadn't made any coffee, either.

There was a small chocolate-colored refrigerator in the corner of the tack room where Otis, my former stallion manager, used to keep candy bars and beer. The top of the refrigerator and the floor around it were cloaked in dust, the plug lying next to the outlet, its prongs bent. I went over to the refrigerator, pulled open the door. There were two cans of Coors on the top shelf. I took one, dry and warm, clicked open the top and took a drink. I set about getting a bucket of soapy water ready, finishing that beer as I found the things I needed on the shelf.

In the stall next to the tack room, Silver Patriot rustled his straw, sniffing the floor for stray oats. This was the first time I'd had the horse in the barn since I sold him and he seemed tense. I'd bred Silver Patriot to seventy-nine mares that spring, about twice the normal number. Five years ago, if a man had a decent stallion he could screen the mares, only selecting the top ones for mating. But this was when the yearling market was ablaze with foreign money and horses were more valuable than the land they grazed on. Then the yearling market collapsed and the money all dried up. If a man owned a stallion, he compensated for the tough times by breeding it to anything with a mane and a tail.

Silver Patriot now belonged to a man named Frances Skiles, an Oklahoman who'd escaped the oil bust. Skiles bought Silver Patriot and the rest of my farm. He was moving in tomorrow and I was leaving for Miami tonight. Skiles had been all right about giving me time to pack, sell off the furniture and all that. What I had left was a sand-colored Mercedes owned by a dummy corporation I'd set up when I saw trouble coming; my clothes, except for the serious winter stuff I'd dropped off to the Salvation Army; some trophies my horses had won. A few of the nicer pieces anyway. I had some money in a bank in Atlanta.

I had this job waiting for me in Miami. A friend of mine, Tim Willis,

who used to have Havrewood Place over on Ferrick Pike, had moved to Florida last year and started a speedboat dealership with what he had left over. He said I could start anytime, that I was entirely qualified. A man who could sell horses could sell anything.

Before Frances Skiles bought my place, he had me agree to stop breeding Silver Patriot for that season. He was indignant about it actually. I said, fine, fine, he's your horse now, do what you think is best. Skiles liked to look me in the eye all the time, a cowboy thing I guessed, and I smiled at him and thought, wait til it gets tight for you, Oklahoma. You'll have the lights burning in the breeding shed twenty-four hours a day.

I'd used the Queen's visit as a selling tool. When Skiles first came to inspect my place, he'd looked over the high grass and falling fences disapprovingly. His eyes grew wide, though, when I started telling him about the Queen. She'll be right over there, I said. And you'll be right here. You'll be able to tell your friends what the top of the world feels like.

The week before the deal was completed, Skiles sent over a vet to make sure Silver Patriot was in good condition. It turned out to be Doc Kirkland, who'd been out to my place a couple of times before. He was young, mid-twenties, a big broad kid from Auburn, bald as an onion from an ointment he'd concocted himself and had tried out on a mangy parakeet.

The first time I met Kirkland was on Christmas Day a year and a half ago. I usually used Doc Gillen, but he was vacationing in the Bahamas, so the vet clinic sent this kid over. Kirkland stitched up a yearling of mine that'd torn his legs all to hell while running through a fence. The kid talked the whole time he worked the stitching needle, telling me about his education, how he was the youngest vet ever to graduate from Auburn. After he'd tied off the last stitch, he stood up straight, stretched his arms, and smiled. "Man, the famous Kentucky horse business," he said. "I've always wanted to be part of this."

I thought he'd tired in the cold and doing all that stitching had

muddled his mind, so I took him up to the house and we sat in the kitchen and drank some whiskey while my second wife, Donna, leaned against the stove and watched. Kirkland was all splattered with blood and Donna seemed a little horrified, probably imagining him to be a time-warped member of the Gestapo. Donna was like that anyway, halfway disgusted with anything that had to do with the horse business. At one time, she'd been a Miss Harrisburg or Hand Creme Queen or something and I'd sat next to her at the Derby a few years ago. We started there. When the banks started getting edgy about me, so did she. Donna was living in Ohio now and had remarried: a relief to my alimony.

The second time Doc Kirkland came to my farm was last summer. I was getting some two-year-olds cleaned up for a couple of retired surgeons from New Hampshire who were visiting the farm that afternoon. I'd brushed the three colts off, considered the asking price for each as I shined the name plates on their halters. When I checked over their papers, I discovered all three needed vaccinations. Doc Gillen was away on another call and since it was a routine deal, I just told the woman at the switchboard to send over anyone available.

It was Doc Kirkland. He pulled up in his new Blazer. He shook my hand. "Glad you asked for me," he said. "Glad my name's getting around."

We walked to the first stall. The colt in there began tensing up as soon as he saw us. Once we were in the stall with him, I took the chain end of my leather shank, ran it through one ring of the halter, under his upper lip, and hooked the clip to the ring on the other side of the halter. I tightened down on the shank so the horse could feel the chain across its gums, and the animal stood still.

When Kirkland raised the syringe needle, the horse struck at him. Kirkland reached for the shank, yanked it out of my hands, and pulled down on it hard. "Son of a bitch!" he said, "How's that now!" The sound of the chain against the horse's teeth made me wince, though it was something I'd heard before.

Kirkland released the shank and the two-year-old stood there, its whole body trembling. The animal tried chewing the chain, blood dripping from its lips. I took a step towards the horse, holding my hands in front of me. I eased my grip around the shank and with my other hand reached up and lifted its upper lip. Three big front teeth were missing, the sockets bloody and deep. I took the chain out of its mouth. "Get some peroxide," I said without looking at Kirkland. "And a tranquilizer."

After we'd cleaned the horse up reasonably well and Kirkland had put a few stitches in the torn gums, he and I stood outside the stall. Kirkland kept shaking his head. "Man, I'm sorry," he said. He kicked at the floor. "What am I gonna have to do to make this up?"

"I have buyers coming here today," I said. "What can you do?"

"I'll stay here and tell them what happened," he said. "I'll tell them you had a vet here with a bad temper." He blinked and spit on the floor. "Maybe we could make fake teeth out of plaster," he said. "You can tell your buyers to come back next week."

"Forget it," I said. I thought I might be able to sell the horse anyway and was already running through my lines to see if any covered a horse missing its front teeth.

"Well, I know I owe you," he said, not looking up. "I mean, I know how all this works. The business. We all do things for one another. I want to be part of that anyway."

"Never mind," I said. "Just get out of here. Sign the papers and leave me the shots. I'll take care of it."

When it was time for Frances Skiles to send over a vet, I waited down by the barn and up pulled Kirkland in his Blazer. He stepped out of it and smiled broadly. He was wearing a tan jumpsuit and his head shone in the afternoon sunlight. He walked over and clasped my hand. "They got a call from a guy this morning about a health check and when I heard it was your place, man, I volunteered right away."

"It's just a health check," I said. I headed for Silver Patriot's stall.

Kirkland followed. "I kept asking the office if you called in anymore," he said.

"I don't have any horses left," I said. I stopped in front of the stall.

"Look," Kirkland said, "This horse looks good to me, right? I mean if you don't want me looking him over too close, I won't."

"There's nothing wrong with this horse," I said.

Kirkland shook his head and glanced at the opening of the barn entrance. "I'll just wave my hand here and you have your health certificate. Your horse will get sold and I've done something for you."

"Look," I said.

Kirkland held his hand up. "You think I don't know how things work? Come on."

I pulled the stall door open too quickly and it spooked Silver Patriot. He propped and went to the back of the stall. "You go in there and check every hair on this bastard," I said. "There's nothing wrong here. I don't want anything from you."

Kirkland stared at me and I thought he might take a swing. But what would he think he owed me then? This was the kind of man who made the business bad anyway. You do what you have to do and say what you have to say and all of it evens out when we're six feet under. Damn fool kid.

Kirkland shrugged after a moment and stepped into the stall. He checked out the horse. Everything was fine. The next day I sold Silver Patriot to Skiles.

I had a friend, though. Clement Parks was his name and his farm was in trouble, too. He and I had been sitting in a dinky bar in Midway two weeks ago and he was in a dismal mood. He groaned when I told him about selling Silver Patriot. He said that was too bad; he wanted to breed a mare to him. Clement had high times when the market was good. We agreed it was a shame everyone was going out of business. Clement said his mare in foal to Silver Patriot would bring enough to let him keep his place going for another year. You know, he said, if my

place keeps going, in a way yours does, too. There was a pause and then he and I laughed together. A good horseman, above all else, didn't get conned. That's what Clement was trying to do there. I knew selling speedboats wouldn't be the same and I wanted someone to survive, even if it wasn't going to be me.

At one time Clement's operation had been impressive. He owned three dozen mares, a couple of stallions, and when things were going just right, he'd bought a French racehorse named Eclair and brought it to Kentucky. He sold shares, even ran an advertisement offering Eclair's breeding services in the *Wall Street Journal.* Clement got so carried away he had a chandelier installed at the center of the ceiling in his breeding barn.

It was a huge thing, that chandelier. He had me over the day it was hung. I stood right underneath as Clement switched the lights on and off.

"It looks like a spaceship," I said.

"Class," he said.

As Clement's farm vet put it, Eclair proved to be *sans désir,* or as he told Clement, who didn't understand at first, unable. Clement tried giving the horse special vitamins and feed supplements, brought in fertility doctors from Humana in Louisville, and even called in an animal psychologist. The psychologist went in the stall with Eclair, put a hand on the horse's forehead. Eclair reared, struck at the psychologist, and broke the man's arm at the elbow.

When Clement's farm started to go, it was like mine and went fast. The yearling market had gone sour and he borrowed against his land to pay the bills and then the value of land collapsed because somebody finally figured out raising thoroughbreds was a fairly risky enterprise. A few of the lucky ones had seen it coming and bailed out, but most were like me, facing bankruptcy and holding on by our wits alone.

Around 5 A.M. the whining suspension of a horse trailer in the distance made Silver Patriot jog to the door of his stall. I'd finished preparing

the bucket of soapy water and stepped out into the hall. I walked over to his stall door. The horse had his muzzle pressed against the screen on the top part of the door. I looked under him. His speckled penis came rolling out of the sheath. Clockwork, I thought. Silver Patriot snorted, the gray coat covering his spine dull in the shadowy light of the stall.

I walked outside. There was another barn I used for breeding, the floor there covered with soft wood shavings, the walls padded. This morning we were going to have to do it down here, out of the way. Park a trailer in front of the breeding barn, turn the lights on, hell, I might as well take an ad out in the paper.

If Skiles found out about this, there'd be a couple things that might happen. He could sue me for breach of contract or try to have me put in jail. One thing for sure is that our deal would be off. The Queen would've come and gone and I'd still be stuck with this farm.

These were anxious times. A man I knew at Readacres in Tompkinsville was in lockup for three months after he'd stolen a lawn jockey from the front entrance of his farm after he'd sold the place to land developers. There were a million worse things I could be doing other than letting Clement breed his mare to Silver Patriot, but if we got caught somehow it would've been the worst thing that could happen for me. I didn't want to be the last horseman left in Kentucky. What do you think that poor son of a bitch would be resorting to?

I stood in front of the barn as the truck's headlights glanced down the road towards me. It was still dark outside, the sky deep ocean-blue. When the truck pulling the trailer was fifty yards away, I waved for it to pull around the back of the barn. The truck turned off the road, angled for the side of the barn, the trailer dipping as it went over low spots in the grass. The truck drove alongside the barn and I walked after it.

When Clement had the truck and trailer behind the barn entirely, he switched off the engine. Silently, he stepped out of the truck, and like a shadow really—it was that dark—jogged to the rear of the trailer

and threw open the iron arm which helped hold the back ramp in place. He jumped on the wheelcover on the side of the trailer. He was a short man, late thirties, and was wearing jeans, a light-colored T-shirt, and a ballcap. He reached up and tried unhooking the top latch, now the only thing holding the ramp up. When Clement had bought this trailer a few years ago it had the newest, greatest thing: a hydraulic system that allowed for the ramp to be lowered and raised quietly and carefully without startling the horses inside. But something had gone wrong a few months after he bought it and when Clement called the company to complain, he discovered they were out of business.

Now, he gave the ramp a push and it swooped to the ground and landed with a muffled thud in the soft grass. Clement jumped down from the wheelcover. He walked over to me, shook my hand. "Do you miss it yet?" he said.

"I'll be in sunny Florida while you're standing here in a goddamn food line," I said, laughing.

"Right," he smiled.

We unloaded Clement's mare and he clipped the end of a rope shank to her halter and led her around to the front of the barn. Once we stepped into the barn hall, the mare's hooves clattered on the concrete and Silver Patriot grunted from his stall. The mare swatted her head from side to side and Clement tried patting her neck. She was a small bay, kind of dumpy-looking really, but once a foal of hers had sold for $300,000. I guessed Clement hadn't had time to clean her up because her mane was chunked by dried dirt, her back dusty.

I could see Clement more clearly in the barn hall light. His eyes seemed energized, his face deeply lined and listless. I reached in my pocket, took out the breeding certificate, and held it to him. "Before I forget," I said.

Clement took the paper, stuffed it in his pocket. "When I get my things in order," he said, "I'll send you payment of the stud fee."

"Right, okay," I said. I walked to a stall across the hall from Silver Patriot's. "Let's put her in here," I said, pushing the door open. Clement led his mare in there and I went across the hall to the tack room. I lifted the bucket of water, sponge floating on top, and picked a roll of Vetrap off the shelf.

Clement held the mare while I tied her tail from the top halfway down with Vetrap. Then I washed her out. "So if I need to make my getaway by sea, you're the man to call?" Clement said.

"Speedboats," I said, "Now there's something a man can look forward to selling." I smiled at him. "Yes sir, this model *does* come in yellow."

After we finished with the mare, Clement and I left her in the stall and we walked across the hall to Silver Patriot's stall. I went to the tack room to get a leather shank and a twitch, a long wooden cane with a rope loop at one end, something I always had to use on Silver Patriot because around breeding time he'd about lose his mind and would rear and strike at anything.

Clement had Silver Patriot's stall door opened halfway and was holding the horse by the halter. The animal's eyes were burning brilliantly. I handed Clement the shank and he hooked the clip at the end of it to the horse's halter. I put my hand through the loop at the head of the twitch and reached for Silver Patriot's muzzle. I pulled the heavy skin towards me, tilted my wrist up, and let the rope fall across the tips of my fingers. I nodded to Clement and he took the twitch near the bottom and began turning it. The rope tightened around the horse's muzzle and that sensation froze him. I'd seen horses try getting out of a twitch, but Silver Patriot always stood like a soldier when I had it on him.

"We going to do this down here?" Clement said quietly as I was washing the horse off.

"Yeah," I said. "It'll be fine." I stood up and Clement looked concerned. "Our luck can't be that bad," I said and he nodded and

grinned. He untwisted the twitch, removed the shank-clip from the horse's halter. Silver Patriot went to the back of the stall, then came forward snorting after we stepped out.

"We'll just do it in the hall," I said, "Right here in the hall. If my stud has trouble finding the mare, I'll drop the shank and help him."

"It's not like he's going to run away from it, huh?" Clement said. He went to get his mare. He led her out with the rope shank he'd brought and they waited for me in the middle of the hall. I stepped next to Clement and put the twitch on the mare. I went back over to Silver Patriot's stall and hooked the leather shank back on him. I couldn't use any twitch on him then: he was the one who needed to do the moving.

I brought Silver Patriot out of the stall and he went straight for the end of Clement's mare. The stud sniffed at her, his sides pulsing with swift breath, hooves splattering nervously on the floor. I stood at the end of the shank, letting him do what he wanted. The mare raised a back hoof and Clement tightened the twitch down and she lowered it again.

Silver Patriot heaved himself on her. His penis was solid and erect and entered her easily. I was relieved there. Sometimes a stallion could get crazy if he couldn't find his mare. Normally you had a man there for just that reason, to take hold of the stallion's penis and help it with entry.

Silver Patriot thrust at the mare several times and I wondered what would happen if somebody drove onto my farm lost or needing to use the phone and saw this light in the barn and found Clement and me here doing what we were doing. What would they think? Two bankrupt horsemen breeding a mare and stallion in the dead of night. We'd tell the stranger a fabulous lie. I smiled thinking of the possibilities.

And I thought about Frances Skiles finding out and the color of his face and him threatening to do everything about it I could imagine. The kind of man who'd make nothing but trouble for me.

Clement was watching the mating intently and I thought of that

damn chandelier in his breeding shed. It was gone now—the bank had seen to that. But it had been a fabulous thing, something you'd be unlikely to forget. How could you not want to help a man who'd done something like that?

Silver Patriot rested now atop Clement's mare. He gnawed at her mane, his weight seemingly heavy on her back. Clement nodded to me and I pulled the shank to get the stud's attention. Silver Patriot didn't respond and I yanked on the shank again. The horse tried halfheartedly to dismount. "Come on, now," I said, yanking at him again. His hooves had slid forward during the mating and I realized he was trying to balance himself on the mare.

I was ready to tell Clement to move the mare up a step when Silver Patriot tried dismounting again and his hooves slipped. The horse landed on his rump right at the mare's back feet and there was a moment when the animal was sitting up like a dog. He fell straight backward then, the tops of his shoulders and the back of his head hitting the floor. There was a quick cracking noise, something in the bones giving way. The mare kicked at the commotion and Clement swiftly pulled her away.

Silver Patriot rolled to his side and was motionless. He breathed fiercely, his eyes blaring, wide open. The barn hall was very quiet then. Clement stuck the mare in one of the stalls and came over to where the horse was lying. "Something snapped," he said. Clement took off his hat and ran a hand over his thin hair.

"His back, I think," I said.

"Jesus," Clement said. Outside it was beginning to grow light. Thirty minutes and it would be daybreak. The horse's rib cage rose and dropped. One of his eyes seemed to be staring up at the ceiling, an eye bright and shining like a huge, wonderful marble. I hoped the stud wouldn't get phobic and start struggling against what was wrong. That would be horrible because Clement and I wouldn't be able to do anything but watch.

Silver Patriot couldn't move. Clement grabbed me by the wrist. "What are you going to say?" he said. "What are you going to tell everyone?"

I shook my head and felt my lips tighten.

"He's insured, right?" Clement said. "You said that skinhead vet had been here."

"Yep," I said. I turned and walked a short way down the hall. I wanted to get in my car and drive to Florida and sit in a lounge chair for a month dreaming up alibis.

"Is Doc Gillen in town?" Clement said. I nodded without turning to look at him. "You know how that old bastard is. He'll ask questions."

I didn't know about that. Maybe if Doc Gillen got here he could work with us a little. I turned and started back for the horse. His penis was still erect, the tip touching the bottom of his stomach. I'd heard of something like that, men who were paralyzed in wars still getting hard-ons, but this signaled something worse to me now: loss of control.

Clement was gone. I heard something from the tack room and I couldn't think of what he might be doing. Something fell to the floor and Clement swore. I hoped his mind was working all right. At some point he'd have to get his mare and trailer out of here.

He appeared from the tack room carrying a bright orange safety extension cord. It was a long, thick cord we used for X-raying horses in their stalls. There was only one outlet in the barn and it was in the tack room. The cord's insulation and thick rubber exterior protected open wires and sparks from touching the straw on the stall floors.

He walked over to me, trying to sort tangles. "I have a plan," he said, without looking up. "I'm gonna pull my truck around and we're going to drag this horse out to his paddock."

"With this cord," I said, taking a bit of it in my hand, "it'll snap like a goddamn rubber band."

"We'll double it up and double that up if we have to," he said. "It'll

hold." He handed the cord to me. "I got a chain in the truck," he said. "We'll get this done." I paused a second, then took the cord. "I thought about tying some of your shanks together," he said, "but you need to soak leather to get it to hold right."

"Damn, Clement," I said.

He kicked the cord away from his feet. "You take care of this," he said. "I'll bring the truck around." He turned and suddenly ran past Silver Patriot, threw open the hall door, and disappeared.

I worked on untangling the cord. When Clement's engine started up, I pictured him just driving off and leaving me to do all the explaining. Then I heard his truck stop along the side of the barn. He was unhitching his trailer, was going to do what he said. He'd never just leave his mare, of course, I knew that. He needed this stud to be out of the barn, his mare out of here, so he could get back to trying to save his farm. He'd back up my story and I'd back up his, whatever it turned out to be.

We did what Clement suggested. The horse was facing away from the entrance of the barn and Clement backed his truck in and brought out a chain as thick as a man's wrist with big hooks at either end. Clement pushed one hook under the horse's foreleg, then stepped over, reached under the animal, and pulled the hook through, the chain following it. I did the same with the cord, having doubled it twice and shoved the two loop ends under the animal's lowest rib-cage bone. I stepped over the horse and pulled the loops through. I hooked the loops to the bumper of Clement's truck, then went to get the other ends to tie them off. Clement did the same with the chain.

After we finished getting the horse tied behind the bumper, Clement went to get in his truck. Silver Patriot had attempted raising his head twice to see what was going on, but could only get it a few inches off the floor before the strain got to him.

Before Clement pulled the driver's door shut, he yelled, "You follow! Anything happens, give a holler." He closed the door and started the engine. I stepped to a spot a yard from my horse's belly.

Clement eased the truck forward. The chain and cord tightened and the horse was pulled forward a few inches. The animal's hooves raised from the floor and I thought he was going to roll over. "Keep going!" I said. Clement gave the truck more gas and headed for the hall entrance. The cord and chain held and the horse didn't roll over, though his feet were angled upward crazily like an animal still falling.

Once Clement was on the hard dirt road in front of the barn, he aimed for the closest paddock, about forty yards away. He was going steady now, ten miles an hour, a good clip if you're pulling a thousand-pound animal behind you. Clement got off the dirt road and drove over the high, wet grass of the field. Silver Patriot's head remained lazily to one side and didn't seem responsive to anything. I hoped the horse wasn't alive anymore.

The gate to the field was open and Clement drove through and out about sixty yards, the tips of the grass touching the underside of his truck. Clement stopped the truck and left the engine running. He jumped out and we unhooked the horse. After he had thrown the chain and cord in the bed of the truck, he nodded to the path he'd made, the grass bent to the ground by the weight of the horse being pulled across it. The worst things, though, were those tire tracks. It looked exactly like what it was: a paralyzed animal had been dragged to the center of a field.

Clement put his hands on his hips, surveying the path. "What are you going to tell them?" he said.

"I'll think of something," I said.

"I don't know about this," he said. "Maybe I've had better ideas."

"It'll be all right," I said. "You better go now. Make sure you back out over the tracks." The horizon had broken by this time and the sky was a ceiling of thick gray clouds.

Clement shook my hand. I thought he wanted to say something to me, good luck probably, but I guess he didn't want to sound scared. "I already forgot your name," I said, and he nodded. He walked over and got back in his truck, carefully backed around the horse, then

straight out over the tracks. He pulled around the side of the barn, hooked up his trailer, went in the barn to get his mare, and then he was gone.

I looked at the path and thought, this is only one set of tracks, it shouldn't be that hard to cover it up. I stood there for a minute thinking about my options. After a minute I headed up for the house to call the vet clinic. Then I'd have to call Skiles and he'd have to get his insurance man over here. It wouldn't take long for that: insurance men were already jumpy and suspicious about every horse claim anyway. They'd want to get here quickly, judge for themselves if an animal could be saved.

I wondered how truly damaged Silver Patriot was, if anything could be done for him. Maybe Doc Gillen knew some trick to fix him up. Doc Gillen had been around forever. I thought of him looking over those tire tracks and eyeballing me and demanding some answers. When I was almost up to my house, I decided whatever was wrong with Silver Patriot could not be fixed.

I waited by the paddock where my horse was lying. I didn't turn when I heard the car coming up. After the engine died and the door opened, there was Doc Kirkland's voice. I'd been standing there watching the sunrise, Silver Patriot's rib cage rising and falling in the high grass, lost in my own thoughts.

Kirkland walked over to me. He was wearing a light blue jumpsuit and his head seemed dull, like it had been powdered. "They said you called for me!" he said while still a few feet away. He looked out to where I was looking now. "Wow!" he said, "What happened?"

"I came down to feed this morning and found him like that," I said.

"Looks like somebody ran over him," he said.

I faced Kirkland. "I came out," I said, "down here to feed. The horse was in the paddock. I think he must've slipped in the grass or something."

"Looks like he got hit by a car," Kirkland said again.

I stepped closer. "You're the man here, Doc," I said. "A man's farm is riding on this."

He pushed up his lower lip and nodded. "But you're leaving, right?"

"I'm not talking about me now," I said. "I mean Skiles, the guy who's buying this place. If he doesn't collect his insurance on this horse, he won't put any more horses on this farm." He stared blankly at me. "Jesus, he'll probably subdivide it. We've got to keep together here now, you and I."

"You're leaving," he said. "You can say what you want."

"All I'm saying is that you and I have to be on the same page here," I said, nodding. "That's all."

"What am I supposed to say?" he said.

I slapped him on the shoulder. "All you say is that you came here, saw the horse like he is now, and drove your Blazer out in the field. You can drive right over that path there."

"Why would I do that?" he said.

"You know," I said, "you didn't know what to take out to the horse, it's a bad injury and all. So you took the whole truck out there." Doc frowned. "It's entirely believable," I said. He was quiet.

"Look," I said, "Skiles will get his insurance money and he'll see everything here plays straight and he'll want to invest more. He's an oilman for Chrissake! He'll buy horses and have them all over this farm. He's the kind of man we need!" I slapped him on the arm now. "You both are!"

Doc winced. "Maybe nobody will believe my story."

I smiled. "As soon as you drive out there, your story is the truth."

Doc looked out to the horse. "What do I do again?" he said.

"You drive over that path there," I said. "Pull around to the other side of the horse, right over the tracks." He listened while looking at the ground. "You drive over that path and this farm will be full of horses again. Not a bad trade, right? But we need to go on and do it. The others will be here any minute."

He tilted his head and shaded his eyes with a big hand. The sky was lightening and I was already thinking about Florida. "So what happens to you?" he said.

"Hell, I'll be around," I said. He stared at me and nodded. "I might start another place up myself."

"All right," he said.

"Better get in your truck now," I said. He did that. He had a cordless phone in there like most vets. I'd call Skiles again to make sure his insurance man was on the way. I'd do it out in the center of the field with my horse breathing hard at my feet.

I decided to stay in Kentucky until the Queen came, so, in one way, I had meant what I'd said to Kirkland about hanging around. In selling, you do at some point have to say something that is the truth, though all you have to do there is understand your buyer's beliefs and appeal to them. That is the trick, that will always be the trick.

I stayed in a motel outside Lexington called The Kent, about fifteen miles north of the racetrack. I took a room around the back, kept the car parked there. I didn't want anyone knowing where I was. Probably, it was risky staying that extra week.

Still, everything worked out. I brought all the trophies from the trunk of the car into my room and set them in various places: a silver plate atop the television where I placed my liquor bottles; a half-dozen julep cups over on the bathroom sink; two gold bowls I cracked peanut shells into one night while watching a ball game, Reds vs. Pirates.

The Queen came to the racetrack on a Saturday, and like everyone else who wanted to see her, I had to wait in line to buy a ticket. That was a cold Saturday, unusual for Kentucky in mid-May. I had nothing tweed, wool, or corduroy left, so I put on four pairs of socks and underwear. A couple of T-shirts, one button-down, and a khaki coat added to that still weren't enough, but I knew after this day was over it would be.

I paid my bill at the motel that Saturday morning, packed my bags,

and left the trophies in the room. I gauged how far south I'd be able to drive after the races before having to pull over for the night. Northern Georgia, I guessed.

I left the motel for the track, sat in traffic for a time, and got there right before the second race. The grandstand was packed inside because of the Queen and the cold. The newspaper had said she would be coming down to the saddling ring before one race, though it didn't say which one. It hadn't been the first: I asked the first three people I saw.

After the fifth had been run, even the stalwarts who had hoped to see the Queen up close retreated to the glassed-in sections of the grandstand. I thought she wasn't coming at all then, though I stayed outside drinking bourbons.

Finally, right before the eighth, after the horses left the saddling area for the track, six men surrounding one woman in a powder-blue dress and pillbox hat came quickly across the grounds, right in front of everyone pressed up against the huge grandstand windows. People were standing ten deep. They leaned forward, craned their necks, their breath heavy on the cold glass. The window began to fog. For a second the Queen stopped and then stuck a short arm in the air and waved to them, those who were inching closer as they were fading away.

Collector

When I was seventeen and my brother was thirty, he and I shared a row house on Ferris Street in Covington. My brother's name is Kirby Fillapiano and he was a fairly sharp bookmaker who ran a profitable phone operation out of his room. Our mother had been going with different men when she had us. She had since moved away with another man and was living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I never knew if anyone else had broken her heart, but I knew Kirby had. He was tall, black-haired, and women saw promise in him. Our mother had made sacrifices when she brought Kirby up, putting him through a prep school over the river in Cincinnati. After graduation, he had come back to live in Covington, just two blocks from where he was raised.

My name is Willy Raymond. I worked for Kirby as a collector, though most men laughed when they saw me coming. I wasn't tall or strong or even tough-looking and had to rely mostly on talking in square terms with a client to get money out of him. Occasionally I'd go to a racetrack, whether it was Latonia Park, Rollo Fields in Cincinnati, or Miles Race Course outside Louisville, and make bets for Kirby or lay some money down on a horse he thought a gambler had inside information on. I'd stopped going to school by this time. Working for Kirby was my way of paying the rent.

Kirby made a pretty good living in those days. He had over a hundred clients, mostly blue-collars and retired geezers who lived within the county line. Most of them bet steadily, daily. People who bet this often really aren't interested in winning. Maybe they're bored, looking for something to get fired up about. All I knew for sure was that we took their money.

I was going out with a girl named Claudia Atanwood, spent a lot of time with her. Kirby didn't like that much, didn't like it when she spent the night. He'd come down to the kitchen and be moody with us, though we always made him breakfast and Claudia was good about starting conversation.

One morning in early November, three months before my eighteenth birthday, Kirby came down looking mean and disgusted with everything. I knew there was going to be trouble the first time he opened his mouth. He'd been up late the night before. I heard him arguing with someone on the phone past midnight. It wasn't a gambler because Kirby didn't work like that. He was always calm when there was a disagreement with a client. If there was a discrepancy about who owed who, Kirby often wound up saying the client was right even if our records showed we were. He wanted to keep their business, knew he'd get his money back eventually.

But that night he'd been talking at the top of his voice. It had gone on for a while. I heard him walk down the steps later, to make himself a drink, I thought. Now, he was sitting at the kitchen table. He'd been silent a few minutes when Claudia put a plate of potatoes and eggs in front of him. "This will make me sick," he said, pushing the plate away. As Claudia walked away from him, he said, "You're nothing but river trash. You and Willy are gonna end up living out of a car, keep all your valuables in an empty box of Pop Tarts."

Claudia was at the stove. She set her hands atop a black burner. She was the first person I'd ever made love with. She knew how things went, was good about telling me if I was doing it wrong. She wanted

to get along with Kirby because she knew he wasn't easy to get along with. She wasn't going to put up with this forever, though.

Kirby sat at the table and after a minute broke into a smile. I knew his moods came to him like that, up and down, but this wasn't a friendly smile. "You just need something to sleep with," he said to me. "Anything in a skirt. Someone else will be standing at the stove for you next year."

"You're wrong," I said. Claudia was looking at the ceiling, drawing slow breaths. I hoped he wouldn't say anything else.

It was quiet a minute, then Kirby laughed and stood up. "I need you to go to Latonia today," he said. "I wrote the name of the horse. It's on a slip of paper on your bed." He slowly headed out of the kitchen, hands in his pockets. His steps were dull and leaden going back up the stairs.

After a door closed up there, I stood behind Claudia, put my hands on her hips. Light was coming in the kitchen from the window over the table, dull white early winter light that stopped at her feet.

"You should defend me more," she said, without turning. "You should've rammed a knife in his fucking heart."

"It's Kirby," I said. "You know how he is. He's at his worst in the mornings."

"Leave me alone for a minute, will you?" she said. "Go upstairs or something."

I did what she asked. Claudia had once said to me being a peacemaker was my nature and this wasn't necessarily a positive characteristic. Peacemakers can be viewed as gutless or meek, but to me a peacemaker is someone who has seen some fighting.

My room was past Kirby's and I didn't hear anything from inside his door when I walked by. My room had three windows, one on each wall except the door's. The bed was unmade. One of Claudia's blue sneakers was sticking out of the covers.

Kirby's note was on the foot of the bed, on top of it three hundred

dollars in tens and twenties. I'd never cheated Kirby, though I planned to. As soon as I cashed a big ticket for him at the track, I was going to put the money in my pocket and leave town with Claudia. We'd go west—Wyoming, I thought. Kirby had to trust someone to keep from losing his mind. It was me he trusted.

Claudia and I left for Latonia at noon. I had been slow getting my room back into shape, hoping Kirby would come down the hall and apologize, which he did do from time to time. But the door to his room was shut and it stayed that way.

It was cold and dry as Claudia and I walked down the street. I was glad to be outside with her, didn't mind the early winter weather at all. There was a bus that stopped at the corner of 19th and Ferris that would take us to the track. Kirby had a car, a white Mercury Cougar, which he primarily used himself.

I was glad to get to the track. Claudia liked going to the races, but I don't think I've ever met a young girl who doesn't. She liked the action, the bettors, the horses, the prospects of winning. I hadn't told her about my plans for Wyoming because I didn't want a lot of talk about it. When it happened, when the horse hit, I was going to tell her to go home, pack a bag, and meet me at the bus station. That's how it was going to work. We'd be halfway to Wyoming before any of us—Claudia, Kirby, me—realized what had happened.

Claudia and I got to the track at a quarter til one. The first race was at one-thirty and Kirby's horse wasn't running until the fifth. Claudia and I had a few beers apiece, sat quietly, and watched the races.

* * *

Kirby was waiting for me in the kitchen. There was a cold rain falling outside as it had been for the past half-hour. Drops ticked against the window by the table.

"Where you been?" he said.

"I stopped and had supper." I had been with Claudia at the Mon-

mouth Cafe. We sat next to the window by the street and ate in the blue light of the rain.

"Horse didn't do shit, did he?"

"No, it didn't." I sat down across from him. "Never ran a step." The horse had broken poorly, trailed early, wound up passing a few down the stretch, and finished sixth. I wasn't entirely unhappy about it. I would've hated to have left Kirby on such a bad note.

"What'd you do all day?" I said to him.

He looked at his fingernails, curling the tips of his fingers to touch the palm of his hand. "I've been sitting here and thinking," he said. "Something's gone wrong." His brown eyes flickered in the kitchen light. Kirby didn't like to admit he was in trouble, even when he was in fairly deep. He was like our mother in this way.

"You have to trust me," he said. "I'm always looking out for us both."

"I can look out for myself."

"No, you can't," he said.

"Maybe you can't, either," I said. His eyes locked with mine. I had just had dinner with my girl while a cold rain fell outside and I felt confident.

"Shut your mouth," he said, "and listen to me."

* * *

The following morning I was driving down Vine Street in Kirby's car. He said the woman would be waiting in front of the Walgreen's. When I was a block from there, I saw her. She was standing with her arms crossed, wearing blue jeans and a brown coat that went to her waist. The street was covered with damp, wet leaves, and she leaned forward, looking into the car twenty yards in front of me when it passed her.

As I pulled up, she already had a foot on the street. I leaned over and pushed the door open. "Are you Linda?" I said.

She put her head inside the car and gave a spare smile. Her face was

dry, lined around the eyes, and thin blonde hair fell to her shoulders. She seemed to be the kind of woman whose attractiveness would depend on what drink you were on and what you had at home waiting for you.

Her blue eyes went blank. "Kirby couldn't make it, huh?"

"He's sorry. I'm here instead. Willy's my name. I'm his brother."

She looked me over for a second. "Jesus," she said, "you're just a kid." I guessed she was older than Kirby and maybe didn't know him very well. "Did you bring the money?" I nodded. "I guess that's all I can ask for," she said. She pulled the door open all the way and got in.

We drove along for a minute in silence. Before I got on the interstate, I said, "What time's the appointment at the clinic?"

"Right now. The sooner the better. Whatever."

I looked back to the road. I thought I recognized Linda. She was a waitress or hostess at one of the clubs. I wasn't old enough technically to go to the clubs and drink, but we knew people who worked in a few of them and they never gave me a hard time. I thought of my brother sitting at a table, talking Linda up, glancing at his watch whenever she looked away.

"I guess I'll drive fast," I said. "Would you mind that?"

"Go as fast as you like," she said, lighting a cigarette. "Maybe people'll think we're headed someplace important."

It was quiet again for a minute. The inside of the Mercury was filling up with cigarette smoke. The only noise was the car tunneling through the dull morning air.

"You mind if I turn the radio on?" I said.

Linda turned her head slowly and looked at me. She said, "Please stop asking me questions. Please now."

I didn't turn the radio on. I just decided to keep my eyes straight on the road until we got to the clinic. The sun was rising in the sky behind us. Linda lit another cigarette and looked out the window. How big a deal this was for her, I wasn't sure. You really don't know what is important to some people unless you've been around them and

know what they're like. It made no difference to me. Linda and I were strangers and a little time spent in a car together didn't seem likely to change that.

We drove past Carrollton. We'd been on the road for an hour. "I need to go to the bathroom," she said.

I pulled over at the next exit and found a gas station a half-mile down the road. After Linda got the key from the attendant, I decided to fill the car up. The gas tank only took four dollars' worth and I gave one of the twenties Kirby had given me the night before to the attendant, who gave me change. While we were doing this, Linda came out of the rest room, walked over to the car, and got in.

"I'll be needing that key back," the attendant said.

I walked over to the car. "Do you have the key to the rest room?" I said to Linda.

She appeared puzzled for a second, then she said, "Oh yeah, shit." She reached in her purse. "Tell the mechanic I was going to keep it as a memento of this fine morning here." She held the key out to me and I took it.

Once we were on the road again, Linda smoked and stared straight ahead. "Your brother is a prick," she said finally.

"Well," I said.

"Ha," she said, smiling. "Look at us, you and me, cleaning up somebody's mess. Kirby's the devil."

* * *

I'd been to Louisville a half-dozen times before this to run bets over to Miles Race Course and once to pick up six hundred and fifty dollars from a man named Amos who lived downtown on Broadway, which, as it turned out, was only a few blocks from the Bessemer Clinic. I parked in a lot across the street from the clinic and wasn't sure what to do next.

"You'll have to come with me," Linda said. "They won't let me go through this unless I have someone with me when I walk in." I got out

of the car and walked alongside her. She was a tall woman, though it hadn't seemed this way as we drove. She walked with long, even strides.

She took my hand as we crossed the street and I exhaled a breath of cold air. The word *Clinic* was printed in thin green letters on the front door's windowpane. I pulled the door open and we went in. Across the room was a receptionist sitting behind a desk. To the left, a man was sitting in an otherwise empty row of chairs along the wall.

Linda and I walked to the desk and the receptionist looked up at us. She was young, younger than Linda, and had short curly brown hair. A sign behind the desk said Absolutely No Appointments. First Come, First Served.

Linda gave the receptionist her name. "I'm here to have an abortion," she said.

The woman's look softened and she slid a white form across the desk. "Fill this in," she said. "And let me know when you're finished." She stared at me. "We need payment in full before we can begin."

Linda picked up the form, looked at it, and said, "Pay her."

I dug in my pocket and counted out the money. The receptionist counted it out again after I handed it to her. "And you'll be waiting for her when it's over?" she asked. I nodded. She nodded. "That's fine then," she said. "Why don't you take a seat? This will be a while."

I walked over and sat next to Linda. She'd taken a chair four places away from the man and was already halfway through the questionnaire. I almost wanted to look at the answers she was giving about where she lived, what her occupation was, all of that. I looked instead over to the man, who was sitting with his legs crossed and smoking a cigarette. He was older, forty or fifty maybe.

After a minute, Linda got up and walked to the desk. The receptionist said something to her and Linda nodded. The receptionist stood and led her off to a door to the right. I hoped Linda would look back at me, but she didn't.

The receptionist returned to the desk and started writing. The man sitting a few seats over nodded. "My baby's in there, too," he said.

"Oh." I wasn't sure if he meant his wife, his daughter, his girl, or what. I thought he might say something else, but he was staring off at the door Linda had gone through. He recrossed his legs.

* * *

I was in the waiting room for hours. The place was almost full by mid-afternoon. A couple of times I'd gone to the desk and asked the receptionist if everything was all right with Linda. "Everything's okay," she said. "She's just resting." The man who'd been there when we arrived left around noon with a woman who looked his age. She'd come out the same door Linda had gone through.

When Linda came out, she had a flimsy-looking white robe folded over her arm. She paused and said something to the receptionist. She was pale and unsteady. I took some steps towards her and then she was hugging me. She squeezed hard and it might've gone on for a minute or so. I wished I was somebody she was in love with or even cared about. She'd known me for a few hours.

When she let go, Linda didn't look up, she just turned and started to walk out. I followed her and when we were outside it felt cooler. Linda walked with her arms at her sides, holding herself steady as we headed across the street.

We were back in the car, and for a moment I held the keys in my hand. "That cold really woke me up," I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"The doctor said I shouldn't but I want a drink right now," she said. "Is there a liquor store around here?"

I shrugged.

"Drive until we find one," she said.

It wasn't far at all, a few blocks, when I saw a place. Sammy's Fine Spirits. Linda waited in the car while I ran inside, bought the most

expensive bourbon I could find. I bought a little bag of ice, plastic cups, pretzels. Kirby had given me twice what I needed for the clinic. He'd already written the whole thing off, I knew that.

I just drove for a time then, heading out on a city road I wasn't exactly sure of. Linda made herself a drink, nibbled at a pretzel twist. The sky was filling with gray winter clouds.

"I haven't been down here in years," she said after another minute had passed. "I'd like to see something of the town, something besides the clinic after all."

"Well," I said, "I really don't know the town so well myself." She looked at me. I didn't want to disappoint her, this day being what it was. "There *is* one place," I said.

"Take me there," she said.

"Wait a second," I said.

"Shut up and drive," she said. "I'm not ready to head home yet."

In ten minutes I had the car pulled up to the entrance of the parking lot at Miles Race Course. The races were still going on and the big lot was half-occupied with cars. I paid the dollar at the gate and drove where the man pointed. I parked by a lemon-colored low-rider Eldorado.

"What's this?" Linda said.

"It's a racetrack," I said.

"I know what it is," she said. "Jesus, I don't want to be around all those people."

"This is the place in town I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Says something about you, doesn't it?"

"I guess," I said. We looked at each other a moment. She almost seemed apologetic. I faced straight ahead.

"Look, hell," she said, "this isn't such a bad place. We'll just stay in the car, though, okay? I'm feeling fairly comfortable in here." She shrugged. "We stay in the car, we don't lose anything, right?"

"I guess," I said.

We sat there for a minute or two in silence. Linda made herself another drink. "I feel like being held for a while," she said. "Can you do that? Gently, I mean?"

This sounded like an all-right idea to me. "Yes, I could do that."

She looked me over for a second as if I'd just sat down behind the steering wheel. "Okay, yeah," she said. "But I'll tell you where to put your hands and all."

I did what she asked. I got in the backseat and from the front she told me how to position myself. I put my back against the door, both feet on the floorboard. It was kind of a crazy angle but I didn't mind. Linda got in the backseat by opening the door on the passenger side. She pulled the door shut, turned her back to me, and slid over slowly. She propped her feet against the passenger-side door. "Put your arms alongside my arms," she said. I did that, too.

Her breathing was slow and easy. It was quiet in the car. "So this place is filled with slicks and lowlifes, huh?" she said in an absent way. I imagined her closing her eyes, ready for sleep.

"It's open for business," I said. I thought about the races going on inside, thought about the next time I'd be here to see them. Kirby would tell me that. It was odd, but I felt bad for him all of a sudden. The tough part of this day was over and Linda felt nice, the curve of her arms something I'd earned. Kirby might never wind up here.

"I'm going to Wyoming with my girl," I said. "I'm just waiting for the right horse." It was the first time I'd ever said this aloud. I wanted to see how it sounded.

"Hah," Linda said. She readjusted her feet, folded her arms across her stomach. "You're not going to leave your brother, look what you've done for him today. I'm gonna go back home and squeeze into my club clothes by the weekend. You're a million miles from Wyoming, kid."

"You don't know that," I said.

"I know enough," she said. "Enough talk, okay?"

She pushed her feet on the door and it made her tighter against me. She seemed to fall asleep after that. She snapped awake in a few minutes. She sat up, turned and looked surprised to see me there. She focused, refocused. I put my hand on the door, opened it slowly. She stayed in the backseat and laid down again. I started the engine and headed for the highway that would take us out.

Groom

A man named Walt Cramer came to help raise Erny and me after our father disappeared in a pretty ordinary looking part of the Cheat Mountains. Dad and some other men had been doing routine work when a mine shaft caved in on them. Walt Cramer kept my mother going, though I was not sure she wanted to. He brought her whatever she needed, which after the funeral mostly involved liquor. Walt took care of Erny and me. He paid us to wipe down his Lincoln Continental and let us take the money to bet at Penn National when we rode with him there on Saturdays.

When Erny was nineteen, Walt got him a job with a horse trainer there. The day Erny left he told me he wasn't coming back. At the end of the summer Walt Cramer found a job for me with a man heading for Shenandoah, a little track in eastern Ohio. I was only seventeen then, but big enough, I guess. Momma complained about it to Walt, but he said, "Now, Marianne, you know I'm only doing what's best for us all." I went in to see her before I left. We laughed about things for a little while and she couldn't stop laughing for a minute there. After she had, she looked away from me and said, "Please go."

Shenandoah was a dump. The man I worked for was a fair horse-

man, but flat lazy. I was the groom for all six horses in his stable. I slept and bathed in the dormitory next to the barn. I got done with morning work by noon, and at first would take showers before I got back for afternoon feedings. After a while, though, I took naps and said forget the shower. The hard work wore me out. The shit smell stayed on.

It was living there with those racetrack people that I saw no one wanted to sleep when they could instead be planted on a good barstool somewhere.

I didn't get along with anyone too well until I met this girl who was a vet's daughter and she was kind of pretty and easy to be around. I asked her to come home with me after the meet was over and she laughed a little and said she was leaving with her father the following week for Alabama. There was a new track opening down there, she said. Meant a lot of new business. The day before she left, she pulled up to our barn in that Impala of hers and blew the horn. I walked over and she got out of the car and said she had something for me. She opened the back door and a little dog fell out. He had close hair and yipped like a seal. "This here is Rocket," she said. She asked if I could take care of him until she came back. "He's good company," she said, getting back into the car. She said she would be back for him. I have not seen her since.

Rocket was kind of funny for a dog. He'd sit in a chair by the window of my room in the dorm and when he'd see me coming he'd go to the window, put his paws against it, and bark. When I'd get inside, he'd jump into my arms. If I didn't catch him, he'd fall to the floor in a heap.

I spent another summer at Shenandoah and it wasn't as bad as the first one. I was working for a different man and he treated us all right, even brought us doughnuts in the morning. At the end of the summer he told us he was heading for Kentucky and we should all come along. The morning before we were ready to leave, I went back to my room

and the door came open without me using the key or even turning the knob. It had been jimmied. Everything was where it ought to have been, but the dog was gone.

I went to the stewards. They ran the backstretch and made the rules for the people who lived there. There was not much they could do about shit like petty theft or breaking up a fistfight, but when it came to the big cheat like fixing races or drugging horses, they would take away everything but your rotten name. It had come to the point where they didn't have to catch a man in the act. If anything suspicious, syringes or needles or anything like that, was found in or around a man's barn, he would be suspended, maybe even banned for life. Racing officials had a betting public to look after.

The steward I talked to at Shenandoah told me dogs got stolen all the time. He said people watched for ones that weren't likely to bite or growl. He said people stole dogs at the track because these dogs were already used to being around horses and wouldn't go chasing after or barking at one. Mostly, they took them for company. He told me to sit down and rest for a minute and he would do what he could, make a couple of calls, and if he couldn't locate Rocket, see if he couldn't find another dog. The stable I worked for left Shenandoah, but I hung around to see if Rocket would turn up. He didn't. I finally decided to get on with another stable and get out of there.

I was in Detroit last summer working for old man Tamjanowicz, a man difficult to like or give a damn about, a man who had a reputation as a crook but wasn't as hard to work for as most hacks. He paid pretty good, too. It seemed like we were putting the days behind us pretty fast until Reggie, a friend of mine who worked for Tamjanowicz also, came up to me one morning and said, "Hey, kid, I think the old man's giving Dixie the juice tomorrow."

I looked at him and I said, "Dixie doesn't need the juice. Old man's playing games with you, Reg."

"I saw him standing in the tack room and when I come in he hides his hand behind his back like this."

"Could've been a pint, Reg. Doesn't want his help to know he's in the bag."

"What does he care if I see? Old drunk. Got to pick his eyeballs off the floor every morning. He could give a good goddamn what I think."

"He knows you talk, Reg."

He looked at me. "Don't say I didn't tell you." He turned and walked away. I went back to my work. Reggie was always acting like a fool when it came to Dixie. He said she was the best horse he'd ever been around. He thought the old man was ruining her. Trained her too hard.

Reg showed me her legs once when he and I were the only ones back at the barn. He gently peeled the standing bandages, then the sheath of cotton. He took my hand and guided it over the back tendon of the cannon bone of the horse's left front leg. About halfway down, he stopped. "Feel that?" he said. I did. There was a curve where the tendon should've been straight. Reg said it was a bow, which was big trouble. Meant the leg wouldn't be able to take the pressure anymore. Dixie had what was called a set bow, an arc in a tendon which was frozen in mid-collapse. Reg had been working hard holding it there and Dixie hadn't taken a bad step for three months, but she wasn't winning like she used to. Last winter the old man had taken her to New Orleans and she had won him so much, the bastard bought himself a nice long Cadillac. Then she bowed. Reg said the old man ran her sore and knew it. Sent her back here in March all thin and flaccid-looking. Reg started swearing as soon as she walked off the van. "What have they done to you, girl?" he kept saying in between the other shit that came out of his mouth.

Old man came back the following week in the Cadillac with a honey named Wilma on his arm. She hung around the barn for a couple of days. She had fire-red hair, a big rear, and a nose for the sugar. Old man sent her on her way a few days later when he found her in the

tack room taking on some exercise rider. Old man wasn't happy about much when he came back from Louisiana. He left the Cadillac out one night and somebody ran a key chain along the sides. Reg said he didn't do it, and I know he was telling the truth. Old man brought a truck to the barn after that.

So after Reggie told me about Dixie getting the juice, I just finished my work and hung around until eleven waiting to get paid. It was a Friday morning. The sun hadn't been out all week. It wasn't like Detroit at all, a place the help hated because it was so hot in the summer and everything was made of metal and concrete and the heat cooked layers of haze all around.

We were here with the old man because he could win in Detroit. Chicago was too tough. So was Louisville. Omaha favored speed—not a good thing for our horses, most of which needed to run a good half-mile to get the soreness out.

The old man was late this morning. I was supposed to get everybody's check and meet them over on Simmons Avenue at Icy Red's Tavern. While I was waiting, I walked over and looked at Dixie in her stall. She was standing there working on some hay. I said, "Hey, girl," and she pinned her ears back. I stood and looked at her for a minute anyway. Man, she was a beauty. A long-barreled chestnut with a full tail that almost touched the ground. She had a nice head on her, too—eyes not too far apart. Some say you can tell how smart a horse is by how far their eyes are apart. I don't know about that, but Dixie was damn smart for an animal. She knew all about being a racehorse. She knew when it was a race day because we wouldn't feed her at noon. She'd get all edgy then, pawing the ground once in a while. She hadn't been doing that lately, though: we'd pull her feed and she'd go to the back of the stall until somebody went in and got her.

Reg thought she was sour and wouldn't put out in races because she was afraid of hurting herself. Horses will do that—will protect themselves. If they are unsure about the footing, or if they know the

pain is coming when that certain hoof hits the ground, they won't extend their stride. I looked at her again. Dixie never used to be such a bitch. She was running the next day, in the Saturday feature. I didn't see how she could win.

* * *

I waited and waited. Around noon, here came Melanie riding that fat old bay pony of hers up to the barn. Melanie worked for a man named Jackie Van Bridges. She said she wouldn't be through with work for another hour. She said she was sorry, but Jackie'd been working them hard lately because they weren't winning many races and he owed money to everybody. I said okay. Then I thought of something and I said, "Hey, Mel, if you don't hear from me in a half an hour, call the guys at Icy Red's and tell them to meet me over in the grandstand before the first race, will you?" She smiled and said sure. Jackie had a phone in his barn, something he had put in at the start of the summer, sure of the fact he was going to have to make a lot of calls—a lot of plans—for that great stable of his. Phone was only ringing now: somebody needed to be paid. Jackie's help all wanted to quit. Mel was overworked as it was, but she didn't seem to mind. She turned the pony around and pointed him home. "Get something down for me, will you?" she said to me because she understood something was up. "I'll buy you a drink later," she said.

What was happening was that the old man was holding our pay until the races were over. He would give us some type of limp excuse later. It meant he had a horse running today, one that he wanted to bet on. If we didn't have our money, we couldn't bet, and the odds would be higher as a result. It was something he was likely to do, actually.

I walked over to the tack room. There was a program in there. I went through it, and sure enough he had that smart-looking three-year-old down the shedrow from me running. Probable odds said 15 to 1.

We had caught on to him by now, trying to slick us all. What we did was get together all the money we had and what we could borrow and laid ourselves down some combination bets and all the exactas we could afford. I met Reg and the others over at the bar in the grandstand and they looked at me and said, "Is it going to happen?" I said yes. I said bet it all on the nose. They needed to be convinced but I managed without telling them I hid in the loft and watched the old man go into the stall of this horse running today and come out after a minute, slipping something into his coat pocket. I gave the guys all the money I had except a dollar, and I went over to get a beer. I didn't even watch the race. Horse won by plenty. Paid 4 to 1. We were lucky to get that.

Reg went back to feed later and the old man was there, and Reg said, "Man, was he hot." Guy probably won more than a thousand bucks and was pissed off. Funny business, you know. Reg said the horse didn't look so good. Was hanging his head in the stall and wouldn't touch his feed.

Reg said he was going to get the old man if it was the last thing he did. His eyes seemed to bounce in his head when he said it. Mel told him to relax and have a drink. We were over at Icy Red's and it was late evening and the place was filled with horse people and locals from the sheet metal shop down the block and the assembly line of whatever haunted house of a car company that was off Interstate 43.

Last year we hung out a lot in the 285 Bar across the street from the entrance to the racetrack. It was air-conditioned and had a blues jukebox. Mostly it was a black bar, but they didn't mind us until Reggie got drunk in there once and called somebody a coon. There wasn't a fight or anything, but they showed us the door and said don't come back ever. Reg and I went back a week later and we talked to James, the man who owned the 285. He tended bar and did just about everything else in his place. He sold me a gold chain once. I gave it to this girl and she laughed at me. Anyhow, James says no dice to Reggie and me. Reg said well he's sorry anyhow. He put his hand out. It was

trembling. Reg had the nerves already. James just looked at him. Reg turned away after a second and walked out. "I just can't have that," James said to me.

It had taken the locals at Icy Red's a while to get used to us, but after we gave them a couple of good tips, they lightened up. The barman didn't give us much hell as long as we paid the tab and didn't start any fights. We owed him for three weeks when we walked through the door that night, and Mel walked over and gave him a fifty before he wanted to get shitty with us.

The room was buzzing. The Tigers were in town hosting the O's, and from what I could tell, giving them a real fit. This was a good baseball town. After he had a good half-dozen drinks, Reg went over and talked to some of the blue-collars about the game. I was glad he was gone for a few minutes. Except for that moment back at the barn, I hadn't been alone with Mel all day. She slid over to me, and I put my arm around her and whispered something in her ear, something kind of sweet to make her feel good. Mel wasn't feeling down or anything, I just liked being nice to her. She dropped her head on my shoulder and mumbled something about being tired, though it was only eight o'clock. I said okay and we picked up and left. Reg waved to us as we walked out. He would see us back at the house.

We rented a two-story over on Randall Boulevard, me, Mel, Reg, and his girl Rhonda, who did nothing but sleep and sit in the kitchen watching television, drinking bottles of Stroh's, and smoking cigarettes. Reg said she was getting over a needle problem of her own, and the best thing for her was to take it easy. The booze kept her from dreaming of snakes crawling out of the sockets of her eyes. Rhonda was up when Mel and I got to the house. She looked up, then turned back to the set. Mel told me she'd be up in a minute and she went over and had a smoke with Rhonda.

I went upstairs and into our room. It was a rodeo hangover in there with riding equipment: chaps, crop, short bat, and some kind of cowhide straps I wasn't sure of, all over the floor and on the dresser. The

bed was unmade, and all the pillows were scrunched up in the middle. Looked like a bed that didn't see much sleeping. Mel's poster of James Dean had lost its tack from the top right and that corner tipped to the middle of the picture. I never thought much of Dean before; never much liked having a picture of him in my room. What I did know was that girls I liked talked about him a lot, and I guessed they were hinting I was going to have to do something pretty exciting to get their attention, something Dean would've done had he been there himself. Mel set me straight on it, though. She said she knew she'd never have a James Dean for herself. She kept a picture of him on the wall to remind herself of it. It helped her to sleep, she said.

She came upstairs after a few minutes. She had already unbuttoned her shirt. Then her wraparound skirt fell to the floor. Mel was one of the few women who worked at the racetrack who would wear a skirt in the off-hours. I guessed she did it because she thought she wasn't as feminine looking as she ought to have been. Mel was just twenty-three and there was a wind callous beginning to form around her eyes. As it was, she had a leathery way about her. The muscles in her arms were smooth and firm; her legs were slender and could stretch into all night. Dirty blonde hair fell to her shoulders when she leaned forward to pull off a shoe. She looked up at me with sky-blue eyes.

She slid into bed and I went over and got in with her. After a time I got the idea she wanted to tell me something, because she kept clearing her throat in little breaths. Finally I said, "What is it, Mel?" She told me. She said she was going to Florida the first of next month. She was sick of Jackie's patchwork outfit. She said she'd called a friend of hers in Miami and there was a job waiting for her with a trainer, a man she called by his first name, if she wanted it. I guess it must've sounded coincidental about her wanting a job and then there was one available like that, but I knew all about this gypsy life on the racetrack, and there was always someone who'd put you up and find you work if your reputation hadn't gone to hell and you hadn't run out on your bills. There wasn't a soul who wouldn't want Mel. She had good hands on

a horse when riding, and in the barn treated them like lapdogs. Only a disaster like Jackie could get her as sour as she was now.

The first thing I thought about when she gave me the news about Miami was, would it be safe down there? But I knew what she'd say to that: "And what is it here?" I guess I really wanted to tell Mel that I loved her, but ended up not saying anything about it because I didn't want to make her feel bad. She fell asleep after a few minutes and I eased myself out of bed and headed back downstairs.

Rhonda was still watching television. I got a beer and took a seat across from her. She said something. I shrugged. I asked her what she was watching and she said she wasn't sure exactly. She was in a haze. What did Reggie see in her anyway? Rhonda had auburn hair that probably would've been nice to look at if she had washed it, and a menacing smile that could get you worked up once in a while. Maybe it was she never seemed interested in anything, I didn't know. Maybe she'd tried it all and nothing worked. Rhonda looked about thirty-five and wanting to get to forty with as little sunlight as possible. Maybe she was a vampire in the bedroom or something. Out here, she was a wash.

Reg showed up in a little while. He had a couple of buddies with him who'd been over before, but I could never remember their names. What they usually did was wait for Rhonda to go to bed, and then they would go into the living room and smoke grass all night. Reggie said he did it because it made him forget about the knee that was always hurting him, the one that didn't heal right after a crazy two-year-old kicked him last fall. I didn't know if Rhonda was on to them, but she got up and walked out after a minute. "Night, lover," she said to me.

Reggie laughed and said, "I hear you, babe." He waited until she was all the way upstairs before he and the other guys went into the living room. He said to me, "Are you coming?" He knew better. I wasn't too wild on smoking weed, especially with those clowns who would sit out there and talk about Pink Floyd for the next three hours. I went into the kitchen, took the phone from the sideboard, and situ-

ated myself in the hallway as far away from their voices as the cord would let me go.

I called Erny. He was in Baltimore. He had a string of horses himself there. They raced year-round in Maryland, so he had a pretty regular life for himself with a wife and a baby daughter and a house they started paying on last year. Erny was a good horseman, too—why he was his own boss at twenty-four. He kept offering me a job as his assistant if I would come to Maryland. I'd ask about the guy he already had, and Erny would laugh and say the guy was quitting. When did that happen? I would ask, and Erny would laugh again and say as soon as you get here. But there was something about having a brother who was successful, something that made you feel jealous and proud at the same time. I always figured if I went to work for Erny we'd fight too much. He didn't think so. Who knew? We did agree on something earlier this summer, though: if I didn't want to move up in the business, I ought to get out.

He was home that night. Between Reg and his buddies talking loud and the noise in the background as Erny tried to speak, I could barely hear a thing. They had won a big one that day, Erny explained. He went on about it. I let him.

I went back in the kitchen and hung up the phone. I looked over to the living room. They were laughing about something. Reg was a mess. Could barely keep his eyes open. Shirt was hanging out. Long hair with stringy curls hung to his shoulders. He was as old as Rhonda, maybe older. Been a groom all his life. Being a groom was like being a private in the Marines in that you wouldn't want to be one forever, and it stood to reason that sooner or later you'd get promoted if the breaks weren't completely against you.

We took care of horses, did all the things for them they couldn't do themselves, like get feed and water, brush them clean, rub the soreness out of their legs. The idea was to get a lot of basic knowledge about the animal, and then in a couple of years take off and get a trainer's license and get a string of your own. If you worked good for a man,

he'd talk you up with the owners and help you to get started. Erny hadn't had to wait: a guy who had horses with Red Ronsell, the man Erny had been working for at Pimlico, came out of the clear blue one day and offered Erny a job as his trainer. Probably knew talent when he saw it.

Reggie always said the groom was the real horseman. He said in the old days guys were grooms their entire lives and proud of it. He said the man who rubbed Man O'War became famous for being the groom of Man O'War. Reggie couldn't remember the man's name, though. If he could've, I didn't know who would've been impressed anyway. There weren't any Man O'Wars in Detroit.

Reg was kind of full of shit like that, but he meant better. He was always trying to do what he thought was right, but a lot of times he didn't seem to know what the right thing was. Like that deal with Rhonda. Reg found her one day sitting on a bale of hay back at our barn and she was crying hard. She was incoherent. So he brought her to the house, and there she was all summer. He gave her what she needed and nothing bad happened to her, but you got the impression making a lounge lizard out of a person wasn't much of a cure for anything.

Reggie wasn't a popular man on the backstretch, and I always thought it was because he was so crazy looking. He had that half-bald, unkept head of hair, and he always was so damn intense about things. He wasn't going to scare anyone physically because he was only five and a half feet tall, and a skinny five and a half feet at that. He and I didn't get along too well when I first started working for the old man, and we almost got in a fight once. He was giving me shit about being a greenhorn and a hayseed and I was ready to bust him in the mouth, but then he suddenly bent over, put his hands on the ground, and lifted his feet high in the air in a handstand. He started laughing. He walked away from me doing that, and all I could do was laugh with him. Up to that moment, I thought he was a nut. But Reggie was funny like that. When things got to be tense he seemed to know what to say

or what to do. I guess if he didn't, he would've been laid out somewhere already.

Reg really was a bigot, though. He was okay about it until he started drinking, then he got loud like he did that night last summer at the 285. He told me about it once. He said when he was a little kid growing up in East St. Louis he'd been walking to school and some black kids would pick on him. It burned some kind of hate in him he hadn't gotten over. James saw it at the 285. No handstand in the world could hide Reggie then.

A time last summer, the old man wanted to send this fast four-year-old we called Tex to East St. Louis for a stake race. Old man said Reggie had to go with the horse. Reg said the old man could go screw himself because he wasn't going to go back to the same city his father was in. Old man said he could give a damn about that and Reg *was* going with Tex. It looked for a second like Reg was going to get fired, but I stepped in there and said I'd go, for Christ's sake. Old man looked at me and said I didn't know enough, but Reg told him that I did, and it ended up with the old man saying he didn't give a good goddamn as long as somebody was on that van with Tex at 6 P.M.

As things went, it turned out to be a bad trip. We got to East St. Louis and it was hot and Tex was so bad on the ride down I thought he had used up something he needed for the race. I got him situated by early next morning, which gave us both a good twelve hours to rest because they raced at night there. I was getting ready to head out to find a ride to a hotel when this tall kneejerk with a droopy mustache came walking over to me. He looked at his feet, then put a hand up to scratch his head. Finally he said, "You don't have any friends here. If you try to make the lead, we'll cut you down." He turned and walked away. I wanted to think about this later, after I'd had some sleep.

When I got back to the track early in the afternoon, there was a message at the barn for me to call Detroit. It was the old man. He said Turner, our regular rider, got hurt when a horse flipped in the gate with him that morning. He wouldn't be coming in to ride Tex tonight.

The old man told me to pick out a rider here or let the stewards do it. He hung up. I said the hell with the stewards and went to get a *Racing Form* and find the name of somebody in the Leading Jockey Standings. I wound up with this kid named McMichael. I went back to see him in the jocks' room a couple of hours before the race. He looked at me kind of funny when I started telling him how to ride Tex. He said, "Don't sweat it, kid, everything's under control."

When the horses came over for my race, I got with McMichael and began telling him how to ride Tex again. McMichael looks at me like I am standing on his foot. I gave him a leg up on the horse, then he looked down at me and laughed a little. He didn't have any front teeth.

When the starting bell rang, McMichael yanked the reins back and Tex's head went high in the air and the field outbroke them by ten lengths. It didn't get any better as the race went on. Tex didn't beat a single horse. When he galloped the horse back to be unsaddled, McMichael called out to me, "What'd you say now?" His gums were rotting away.

I didn't go to the stewards, though I wanted to. They were about the only ones who would give you a break when you brought a horse from one small-time track to another. Except for them, it was house rules. On the big circuit, it's different. In Miami or New York they say, come on and beat us if you can, but here, it wasn't like that at all. Money was tight. Too tight to let somebody come in and take it and leave the next day.

When I got back to Detroit the next night, Reg was waiting for me at the barn. Old man had already gone home, none too happy, Reg said. We got Tex unloaded and sat up in the tack room for a while. Reg went on about how much he hated his family and how the thought of them being close made his blood run cold. I guessed he felt he owed it to me to tell me all this after I'd done this favor for him, but really, I didn't want to hear about families. I listened and he told me how much he hated everything. I wanted to ask if he wasn't carrying around too

big a chip, but I thought it would just aggravate him. He never would say when he left home. I'll tell you this: he didn't get out in time.

I thought Reggie kept expecting this game of horse racing to get a little easier—a little better—and that was why he'd been working at it so long. That and the fact he couldn't find another job which would not drive him completely insane.

None of this was what we wanted it to be.

There was too much bullshit involved in racing. We had to work too hard to keep sore animals running. The real trick was staying ahead of the rules. The juice they were using then could be covered up in a drug test with another synthetic diuretic that was legal. And while it was obvious someone was going to get caught sooner or later and one man would burn, there would always be another trick up another sleeve somewhere and that trick would make its way around.

It was the winning that got to the horsemen, not the losing. You came to understand that you wanted to live fast but weren't sure how to do it exactly, and all of a sudden you were moving and not sure where this was going but it wasn't important that everything made sense and what life was always going to come down to was the sound a cheering crowd could make and how much you could make out of a blur of color and that when you woke up you weren't going to remember much. All you knew were the bare constants. None of your friends had a last name. A lot of meaning came down to one word.

When I thought of the old man, I thought of this:

Cadillac.

When I thought of Reg, I thought of this:

Dixie.

When I thought of life on the track, I thought of this:

Rocket.

There wasn't room for much else. At least not for me.

I listened to the guys in the other room laugh one more time, then I walked upstairs again. I went by Rhonda and Reggie's room. The

door was closed and dark around the edges. Sometimes when she heard me walking by, Rhonda would say my name. I kept going now.

I used to go in. She would tell me to come over and sit at the foot of the bed. She would talk to me, there in the dark. She would tell me how things were going in her life. I knew she wasn't talking to me specifically because she didn't seem interested in me responding. I didn't understand all of what she said, but I think to her it made sense. I imagined this was the time when things were the most clear to Rhonda, when she was sitting up in bed in the dark, putting off the nightmares her sleep surely would bring.

Once when I was in there with her, she got a little hysterical. She told me to get her pills. I turned on the light to find the dresser. She told me which drawer to open: top, left side. When I pulled the drawer open, I saw it contained a vial—several vials—some earrings or something, a small purple jewelry box, two small syringes, and a short sleeve of injecting needles covered at the tips with blue plastic points. I asked Rhonda, probably too bluntly, if she hadn't put the heroin behind her. She said that she had. She said the needles were Reggie's. Said that he copped them from a vet. I knew she was lying. I found the vial she wanted, the one that contained the little yellow pills. I walked over and gave it to her. That was the last time I had been in there.

The alarm went off at four and Mel came right awake like she did every morning, ready to roll. She headed off for the bathroom. I didn't have to be to work until five-thirty, but I let her have the alarm because she needed to be there an hour sooner. Jackie. First, I thought he had a thing for her, but then one morning Mel got me up and asked if I wouldn't mind helping them get started today. When I drove over with her, I saw it was only Mel and Jackie who got to work on time, and they were the only ones who actually did anything. Jackie wasn't meeting his payroll and the help were as apathetic as hell. They showed up when they wanted and did what they felt like doing, and Jackie

wouldn't fire them because he knew he wouldn't be able to hire anyone else. And you couldn't fire people you owed money to.

Mel came in in a little while and said, "Hey, lazy, get up. Time for work." I sat up in bed and she looked at me and laughed. "You look goofy," she said. I kept looking at her but didn't say anything. She pulled on her boots. "I'm really sorry about this Miami thing," she said. I asked when she was leaving, and she said it would be soon. In a couple of days maybe. She looked at me and said, "I'll see you tonight." I guess I smiled because she smiled back. Tonight was all right with me. She reached over and held my chin with one hand like I was her boy or something, which I guessed I was going to be for a couple of more days.

I got to the track a little late. Reg had already fed. I could hear the horses munching quietly as I walked down the dirt shedrow to the tack room. Our barn was like the fifty others at Merchant Park. The barns were rectangular and narrow, long with forty stalls and three tack rooms at either end. Most grooms were doing what Reg and I were doing then, which was checking our assignments on the chalkboard the old man had written out last night. We sat and had coffee while looking over the instructions. We went by the light coming in from the one window in the room, the window that looked out over the barns and, farther away, the track itself and what was beyond. Reg should've looked worse. Three hours of sleep was enough for him, I guessed. His eyes were bloodshot, but they were always bloodshot. He asked me about Doc, the big dark bay I took care of, and I said he was doing fine.

Sometimes when it got too hot I would go in Doc's stall and lean against the cool concrete back wall and close my eyes. Doc would just turn his head to look, then go back to whatever it was he had been doing. Old man hadn't run him yet. I knew why, too. Doc was slow. Real slow. If the owner found out, he'd want to get rid of him, and the old man would lose a paying customer. When the owner came by, he'd

ask the old man how Doc was doing and the old man would say, "Oh, now, he's doing fine, fine, maybe two weeks away from a race if all goes well." Doc has been two weeks away for three months now. Last time the owner was back here, he came over to me and said, "How's this horse really doing?" nodding his head toward Doc. I shrugged. I was no hero.

Reg and I got to talking about Dixie, and he got all irritated. He cussed the old man, cussed the dope, cussed me because I happened to be there. He said he was going to get the old bastard. I told Reg he didn't know anything for sure, and he told me I didn't know anything at all. We left it there. Some of the other grooms came in. There were five of us in all who worked this stable. I was the youngest, and from the looks of the others on that morning, the soberest. It wasn't always like that.

We got to it at six, after the animals had had time to digest their breakfast. The sun was coming up for the first time that week. It had been kind of dark otherwise. Canadians were always saying it was the pollution from the factories. The first billboard you saw when crossing the big bridge into Ontario said You May Breathe Now.

Old man came in at seven. He was a bear. Nothing was like it ought to have been. I was behind in my work, and Reggie hadn't done his right. He stopped and chewed on Reggie for a time. Reg took it, staring at the ground all the while. I had seen Reg like that before, so it didn't surprise me. Reggie acted kind of beaten like that, which some people thought to mean he was a loser. He wasn't a loser. A loser was unlucky. Reg might've won sometimes and never known it. That was a man who was beaten.

Reg could've stared a hole in the old man if he had wanted to, but he didn't, partly because he left his balls back in a shot glass somewhere. Still, those humiliations added up to something. Reg wouldn't take a swing at the old man because the old fucker wouldn't feel a thing anyway. When it happened, Reggie wanted to get the old man where

he lived, get it in his veins, in his livelihood, what had kept the old man going.

Kurt, another one of the grooms, shouted for the old man to come down and look at something. Old man walked down the shedrow and looked into the stall Kurt was pointing to. Turned out the horse that won yesterday, the one we won money on, wasn't doing so well today. He wouldn't eat and was walking the stall. After the vet came and looked at him and they all went down to the tack room to talk about the condition of the horse, I eased down to get a look. It made me feel sick. I looked up and saw Reggie standing down the shedrow in front of Dixie's stall, staring at me.

The vet came back at eleven. He and the old man walked down to the stall of the sick horse and looked in. Vet said something to the old man; the old man said something back. Vet shook his head and the old man laughed a little. Kurt walked down later and told me that everything was going to be fine. The colt would just have to take it easy for a few days, Kurt said. He seemed to be relieved. I looked over at Reggie. He was sitting in front of Dixie's stall, rolling up standing bandages. He didn't look back, but he knew I was watching him.

My work was done, so I went and sat in the stall with Doc for a while. The horse was lying down and didn't even look up when I came in. He knew I was there and he knew I wasn't going to do anything bad to him. He hadn't run yet.

I had seen Mel once that morning. I was leading a horse out to the track and she was riding one back to Jackie's barn. She looked down at me and smiled and kept on. The sun was already making me light in the head by then. Ten o'clock in the morning and it was miserable. What kind of goddamn place was this anyway?

I went to a clear corner of Doc's stall and sat down. I was there a while until somebody poked their head in. It was Reg. He said the old man was going to crank Dixie with the juice. I said, "Hey, Reggie, how in the hell do you know, huh?" Reg looked at me kind of funny, kind

of surprised. "It's on his head, not yours," I said, when he was quiet for another minute.

"Not today," he said. He said it again. "Old man is gonna burn today," he said. He took a step away from the opening and turned and headed back down the shedrow. He started to sing what he had just said to me. It sounded like a nursery rhyme, for Christ's sake.

I stayed in Doc's stall for a while until everybody, including Reggie, had gone. When we had a horse running in the afternoon, somebody had to stay back at the barn and watch things, making sure the animals were okay, making sure nobody like gamblers or other horsemen came back and screwed with our horses, doping them and shit like that. Of course, the joke now was that the gamblers' stuff wasn't strong enough.

I sat there and I thought about Baltimore. The meet at Merchant Park was over in a couple of weeks. I'd have to go somewhere. Maybe I'd just go farther away. Maybe jealousy didn't have anything to do with it at all. It wasn't starting over again with Erny that bothered me, it was that I would have to keep up. That was it. I would have to start keeping up, keeping pace. Like most things, it sounded better than it probably would turn out. But sitting there, I guess I made up my mind. It is something a fellow who sits long enough in a stall will eventually do.

A lot of guys used to give me shit about sitting in a horse's stall. They told me it was dangerous, that I would get kicked. Though I didn't listen to them, I knew getting kicked was a fear worth having. Reggie told me he saw a guy get kicked in the head once, and the hoof went so deep into the side of his face, when the horse pulled back, he dragged the guy with him. Horse had to shake a couple of times to get free, Reg said. Guy lived to talk about it and had a glass eye and a scar that went from a nostril to an ear to go with the story.

Reggie got kicked last year by some crazy two-year-old. I saw it happen. He walked in the horse's stall to fill the water bucket, and for no apparent reason the horse wheeled and got him with a back hoof. Reg fell to the ground screaming, raising some kind of holy ruckus. He was holding his knee like it would fall into a thousand pieces if he

let go. After that first rush of pain went by, he tried to stand, but that just about killed him. The knee got better, but it would've healed quicker if he hadn't tried to be a tough guy about it and gone on and seen a doctor. Maybe he had been trying to make up for the fact he acted so badly about getting kicked in the first place.

I got kicked once. I was standing in the stall giving a sore old runner an alcohol rub on his back legs when Mel came by and poked her head in the opening and said my name. Mel knew this horse like I thought I did, and about the last thing you'd think this old boy would do would be to get unnerved over just another human voice. But that one time it goosed him and he kicked me trying to get to the back of the stall. He didn't get me too bad; I think it only bruised some ribs. But it hurt. Mel said she felt worse about it than I did, but I don't know how she could have really.

Around one, the old man pulled up in his truck and parked it about thirty yards from the tack room. He turned off the ignition. He did next what he usually did: pulled a *Racing Form* up and sat in the truck and read it. I never knew why he didn't read the damn thing at home. Maybe he didn't trust us. Maybe it was why he survived here so long.

Reggie came walking down the shedrow, walking very fast. "I've got something I want to tell you," I said. "I've made a decision on something, Reg."

"Stewards are coming," he said and kept going. I turned and followed him. He was heading for the tack room. I was only a step behind by the time we got there. Reggie was moving quickly once inside, aimlessly situating things around.

"What's going on?" I asked him.

"Stewards are coming," he said.

"Why?"

"It's over," he said, looking at me quickly, crazily, then going back to whatever it was he was doing.

"Look out the window and tell me when you see them coming," he

said. I did it. I watched. Nothing was happening. Reggie accidentally knocked over a chair and a riding helmet that was atop the armrest went rolling out the door a few feet away.

"Get that for me, will you?" Reggie said. I took two steps outside and leaned over to pick up the helmet.

"What's going on in there?" old man Tamjanowicz barked from the truck. He set the *Form* down. It looked like he might get out of the truck.

"I tripped," I said. He looked at me for another second and brought the *Form* to his eyes again. I brought the helmet back inside and told Reg the old man was going to be here in a minute.

"Never mind that," he said. "Just watch for the stewards, will you?" Reggie was standing over in a corner with a hand on the old man's sport coat, the one Tamjanowicz wore every time he ran a horse. I looked again. In the recognizable distance, I saw two men in shirtsleeves and neckties walking with two bigger men, who by their gray uniforms I knew to be security guards. They were heading our way.

"Here they come," I said.

"Wait til they get closer," Reggie seemed to say to himself. He reached in his pocket and pulled out two finger-long tubes and put them in the side pocket of the old man's blue sport coat.

"What the hell?" I said.

Reggie reached down again and pulled out what I immediately recognized as the short sleeve of blue-tipped needles. He looked at me.

"All right, wait a second," I said. "They're still a hundred yards away." It was quiet for a second. I watched. "Okay, Reggie, go ahead," I said. He reached up and put the needles in the side pocket of the old man's sport coat. Outside, a car door slammed shut.

"Get out of here," Reggie said and he pushed me to the doorway. I looked at him.

"Goddamnit, get out of here!" he said. I stood there a second longer. He came towards me. I started moving, one foot under the other. The last thing I heard him say was "Run."

Sophia Winslow's House

From the ages of twenty-one through twenty-seven, I worked on a horse farm in Midlands, Kentucky, called Burroway. I started off there as an ordinary hand, then became a yearling groom, then assistant to the yearling manager. I had four men working under me, and the owner of Burroway, Harry Linderman, would phone the barn every so often to check on things. He was a nice old guy and I was polite with my answers. I had a tenant house to live in, free of rent, and the last year I worked there I was paid to watch over the farm's young horses and teach new grooms how to handle them. I judged our stock for racing potential or how much they might bring at a sale. It was a good setup.

Then the horse business in Kentucky went bust. This is the mid-eighties I'm talking about. For years, there'd been over-investing, calculated profits, and this ridiculous go-getter mood. It took a while for all these greenhorn investors to understand racehorses weren't reliable for earning quarterly interest; most animals couldn't win back their inflated purchase price. These new investors were driven out of the game and, subsequently, sales prices plummeted. Horse breeders had borrowed money on projected earnings and the banks were nervous. They began calling in loans. Being attached to the horse business was

now considered to be poisonous. The value of land dropped. I could go on. The result was that a lot of farms got wiped out.

Mr. Linderman didn't lose his place. It had been in his family for generations and that type of old money Armageddon can't loosen. But when the farm stopped showing a profit from its horses, he put them all up for sale. A couple of Texans came to look over our yearling crop. Somebody from Canada visited us. An English bloodstock agent representing the Arabs bought nine of our horses during a forty-five-minute tour of Burroway.

Mr. Linderman was generous enough about letting the help go. He gave each employee a month's salary and told me I could stay in my tenant house until I found something else. This was a fine offer, but I didn't want to just linger there waiting for some wonderful new job to come my way. Waiting can be a bad thing; you can get too used to doing it. The problem was, no other farms were hiring. Horsemen were being laid off everywhere and even regular jobs around Midlands were hard to find.

I decided to move to Lexington, about forty miles south. It was twice as large as Midlands. I thought there'd be better opportunities. I found a duplex on McGinney Street, the other half of which was rented by this fairly old lady. I began looking for a job. The economy was bad around Lexington, too. The whole town had been tied to the horse business in one way or another: nice restaurants for celebrating the profitable sale of a yearling; clothing stores that offered designer labels; new car dealerships—anything that meant a better lifestyle—and these places had begun suffering, too. Now, if there was an employment listing in the *Herald-Leader,* it had a dozen applicants by noon.

I got lucky and got on with a real estate company, Shively and Furman. They'd downsized, combining a maintenance job with a groundskeeper's. Neither man who'd held these positions previously was willing to have double workload at the same pay. Maybe they'd wised up

and headed the hell out of Lexington. At any rate, I was hired the day I applied.

My job at Shively and Furman consisted of general fix-it work and looking after different apartment buildings, houses and vacant lots. If there was something I didn't know how to do, I'd call a plumber or an electrician. Lee Shively would scream about paying somebody extra, but I figured he'd rather have the bills than a house with an exploding toilet or ashes for walls. I was still a cost-saver for him—we both knew it.

I'd been at Shively and Furman about a month when they brought Joe aboard. Joe Albertello was his long name, but everybody at the office called him Spaghetti Joe or Joe Martini. When Shively first introduced Joe to me, he called Joe my "assistant." Joe had a dome of baldness for the crown of his head, thin black and silver sideburns, a salt-and-pepper mustache. He was six feet tall with a slightly stooping posture. Joe was wearing pressed slacks and a button-down shirt. Right away, I wanted to ask Shively if Joe knew what I did primarily was clean gutters and stick my face in cobwebs searching for breaker boxes.

"Joe can do anything," Shively said. "Just ask him." We were standing in his office. There were pictures on the wall of Shively with his arm around friends at a barbecue or some golf course. There was a photograph of Shively and his wife and weedy kids. Shively clapped Joe on the back. "Right?"

"Well," I said to Joe.

"Yeah," Joe said.

That first day, I didn't ask Joe to do anything that resembled grubby work. I dug up the ground around the septic tank at the Bakers Road property and Joe stood watching with his arms crossed. "This is it," I said. "This is what we do."

He shrugged. "I'm only gonna be here until I get something better going. You know?"

He showed up for work the next morning dressed in gray suit pants and a polo shirt. Our job was to take weedeaters out to Simms Circle and trim around the trees and the foundation of the building.

I took the weedeaters out of the bed of the truck and filled them with the gas/oil mix. Joe took one and started over for the building entrance. He stopped and pulled the cord to the motor a few times. It spit and began running. Joe stepped away from his work every few minutes to brush out the cut weeds that landed in the cuffs of his pants.

The stories that went around the office were like this: Joe was from Cincinnati and had gone belly-up in the catering business. Somebody said it was land development. Joe had been weaving his way in and out of bankruptcy court for the past few years. Loan officers held up silver crosses whenever he walked by. He was Shively's wife's brother or something and was working off a debt to Shively.

But Joe was all right by me. Any work he did was something I didn't have to, and he always had stories to tell. Once in a while we'd get a beer after work. We were sitting in the 427 Bar a particular time and I decided to ask him if he didn't own some old T-shirts or jeans or any clothes suited better for the type of work we did. He sat up straight on his barstool and touched his chest with the tips of his fingers. "I dress well because I expect good things to happen," he said. "I'm not down on my luck like these other bastards you see around. When my ship comes in I want everybody to know I never doubted it." He grinned. Everybody in life has their little speech and clearly this was Joe's. "Let's have another," he said to the bartender.

* * *

Joe and I didn't work together every day. When we were looking after the Shively and Furman houses on the east side of town, we'd split up. Lawns needed mowing, gutters had to be painted—one-man jobs that took a single afternoon. Joe and I would ride over to the east side in the mornings in my pickup and we'd divide assignments. I'd drop him off or he'd take over driving after letting me off. I always volun-

teered to do anything connected with the house at Vine and Conner and Joe let me. He knew I liked the woman renting there. Her name was Sophia Winslow. She was mid-thirties, with collar-length auburn hair and olive-colored eyes. She was home during the day whenever I worked there. The house wasn't much, a single-story brick deal with a concrete path to the front door and a carport at the end of the driveway.

The first time I saw Shively's car parked in that driveway, I didn't think much of it. He was there to check on the rent; maybe she'd been asking for improvements in the place. A couple of weeks later I saw his car there again. I was supposed to trim the hedges around the house anyway, so I guess I started near the windows. I was using these old manual, scissorlike shears with wooden handles, the kind that didn't make a racket. At the third window, I saw Shively and Sophia sitting on a tiny couch together, Shively with his stocking feet propped up on her coffee table. They were watching television and smiling at something.

It was funny, but I didn't see Shively over there again. I hardly knew what to make of it. Then one afternoon I was over at Sophia's house replacing shingles on the roof. I was climbing down the ladder, ready for lunch, and there was her face behind the rungs, staring out the window. "Come in and have a drink with me," she said through the glass.

We sat in the living room and had a beer apiece. I'd been trying to figure out how to work up to this point, then there it was all of a sudden. Sophia looked unhappy. "How do you like this work?" she said. She was in a tan blouse, jeans, no shoes.

"It's okay," I said. "Could be worse."

"I understand," she said. She stood up and headed down the hallway. After a minute passed, I heard, "Are you coming?"

When it was over, we just laid on our backs in silence. "Your boss is tossing me out at the end of the month," she said. "Did you know that?"

I was still. "No," I said. "I didn't know that."

It was quiet again. "He is so rotten," she said. She cleared her throat. "You better get back to work," she said.

I spent the rest of the day spidering my way atop her roof. I thought about the way Sophia looked lying there on the bed. Making love can fix your day, but when it doesn't, things look worse. I guess I hadn't helped much.

I returned to the house the following morning to finish the roof job. Sophia's car wasn't there and the door and windows were closed tight. She'd said the end of the month. I wanted to see her again. I got one of the secretaries to give me her phone number, but she never answered when I called. I drove by the Vine and Conner house in the evening a couple of times. Sophia's car was in the driveway. One time I walked up to the door and knocked. Lights were on inside and I could hear movement. Nobody came to the door, though.

Two nights after Sophia was evicted, Shively called me at my apartment. "When's the last time you were over at Vine Street?" he said.

"A couple of days," I said. I'd been over to mow the grass, which really didn't need it. The house had been shut up tight and Sophia's car was gone again.

"Garbage," Shively said.

"What?" I said.

"First thing tomorrow, get over there," he said. "You and Joe. Stop by the office and I'll give you the key."

The following morning I sat in the Shively and Furman office lot, waiting for Joe. The morning fog was dense and car headlights were haloed as they went up and down Carothers Road. Brakes would squeal intermittently. A horn would sound.

The only other car in the lot was Shively's Volvo. He'd been sitting at the receptionist's desk in the small lobby of his office when I went in. He held a key in front of his nose. Shively was about fifty, had a cone-shaped face and small ears. It was difficult to gauge what a woman

might see in him, other than he was a landlord. "I want you to take care of this quickly and quietly." I shrugged. He flipped the key to me.

The key was in my jeans pocket as I sat in the truck now. That was the worst thing about a job like this: you couldn't tell your boss exactly what you thought of him. Forget it, fuck, I thought. You went around with something eating at you all day and that day would end up being about fifty hours long.

Joe pulled into the lot. He drove this ancient two-tone Seville. Light green top half, dark green bottom. It had a hundred and eighty thousand miles on it. A real piece of work.

Joe walked over to the truck carrying two steaming styrofoam cups. "Just took the lids off," he announced, as I pushed the passenger-side door open. He got in, handed me one, pulled the door closed. I turned over the engine. The tools in the bed of the truck rattled on the drive over to Vine. The fog was lifting. I traveled with one of everything: hammer, shovel, rake, ladder, two lengths of saws, a toolbox heavy with wrenches, screws, washers, etc. I had a small expense account for anything else. I tried to imagine what this job was going to entail.

"Old Shively playing fast and loose?" Joe said, when I told him we were going to the Vine Street house and that Sophia was gone.

"Yeah," I said. I hadn't told him about the afternoon the two of us had spent together. Not that Joe would've tried making a joke—I just felt more protective of what happened between her and me. I hadn't done much of a job there; she was gone now.

When Joe and I pulled up to the Vine Street house, the driveway was empty and swept. I'd just mown the lawn within an inch of its life. Joe and I got out of the truck and walked to the front door. The windows were shut, the curtains were drawn.

"I smell something," Joe said.

I stuck the key into the knob of the door and pushed it open partway. A terrific smell rushed out.

Joe laughed. "Jesus."

I shoved the door all the way open. The living room carpet was covered with trash, bags and bags of split-open deep green plastic. It was a foot high along the walls and in the corners. There didn't seem to be any air to breathe.

"A little unhappy with things, was she?" Joe said. He shook his head and there was a hint of admiration in his tone. "She must've gone out and brought this in from somewhere. Raided the dump." He set his hands on his hips. "I knew a guy once who tried filling a motel room with water. Turned on the spout in the tub, faucet in the sink. A maid noticed water dribbling out the front door. Kid stuff." We just stood there a minute and looked around the room.

Joe began stepping carefully over the piles. I followed. The kitchen was the same, worse actually, because the garbage was stuffed in the sink and crammed into the drawers. Everywhere, there were newspapers, rumpled frozen dinner trays, cereal boxes, beer cans, egg cartons, plastic soda bottles, magazines, rancid vegetables, filthy clothes, brand-new clothes, hardback novels, wine jugs, stray parts of household appliances, plastic toys, shower curtains, greasy pizza boxes.

"Another satisfied customer," Joe said.

I went down to the pay phone on the corner and called the office. "What exactly do you want us to do about it?" I said to Shively when he came to the phone.

"I don't want you parking a dumpster on the property," he said. "I don't want a lot of attention called to this. Can you just bag the stuff up, set it around back until the end of the day? Throw the bags in your truck and take them to the Simmons Road complex. There's a nice dumpster there."

I went back to the house and reported what Shively said. Joe sort of snorted at this. We drove to Sears and bought two 50-pack boxes of garbage bags. We returned to Vine Street. I got the shovel out of the truckbed. We pulled on our leather gloves.

I'd take a turn shoveling while Joe held an open bag, then we'd

switch. There would be something interesting every few shovelfuls. We found a photograph album that began with pictures of a wedding; a perfectly good Texas Instruments calculator, which after a brief discussion we returned to the pile; a half-dozen shot glasses, each bearing the seal of a southern state; a three-iron with a badly bent shaft—there were other clubs like it; a little diarylike book with an X-rated lyric printed on the opening page. The rest were blank. Joe had looked over one of the shot glasses for a moment, then tossed it into the bag I was holding.

By the end of the day we had filled forty-one bags of garbage. We weren't anywhere near finished, either. It seemed like Joe and I had merely removed a layer of it. It was fairly disgusting work overall. We had to make three trips to the Simmons Road complex. The dumpster there really was a big mother, blocked out the sun. After all this was done, I dropped Joe back at the office lot and went home.

The person who rented the other half of the duplex where I lived was Margaret Ellison. She mostly stayed in her apartment. She was in her mid-sixties and through the thin walls of our building I sometimes heard her moving pots and pans atop the stove. She never had friends or family stopping by. She liked *The Jeffersons.* I'd been in her apartment twice, both times to fix something. Shively and Furman had offered me a one-bedroom in one of their buildings at a discount rate, but I knew what that meant: I'd be a twenty-four-hour handyman for the place. Every time something went wrong, people would be at my door. It sounded tiring. The problems Margaret had—loose hinges, faulty cable connection—were nothing. She held a five-dollar bill out to me each time I was finished. "Come on," I said. She pushed it closer. "You're young," she said. "Every little bit helps."

* * *

Joe and I met at the office and rode back over to Vine Street the following morning. We started the same process as the day before. A hun-

dred different smells hit at the same time whenever I leaned over to thrust down at a pile with the shovel, but overall it combined for this mildew, rot odor. I couldn't tell if it was worse than yesterday.

We were working over in a corner of the bedroom and I was about to spear another pile when Joe said, "Hang on a minute." He leaned down and brushed a pocket-sized thesaurus aside. There seemed to be an ashtray or something there.

Joe lifted out a dinner plate. It was trimmed in gold. He reached for a torn-out arm of a flannel shirt and wiped a streak of coffee grounds from the plate. He held it out to me. It was a commemorative plate. In the middle of it was a picture of the Houston Astrodome, more like an architect's drawing actually. The dome of the stadium looked like the top half of a tremendous eggshell with beams stretching across its surface to keep it from floating away. In a half-circle above the drawing it read:

Coming Soon, The Astrodome
Eighth Wonder of the World

Under the drawing was a tiny red star with a "T" in a white ball at its center. "Texaco" was written under the star.

Joe looked at me. "This, I can sell," he said. "I know a guy in Louisville who handles things like this." Joe stood slowly. He brought the plate closer to his eyes.

"Somebody had it all these years," I said. "Why would they throw it out now?"

"They figured it was crap. Got tired of looking at it. Who knows?"

"How much is it worth?" I said.

Joe glanced up. "Fifty bucks, maybe a hundred. You never can really tell. It's worth a drive for me to find out." Something was clicking behind his eyes. "You drive me over to my car. I'll run the plate to Louisville. On the way back, I'll pick up some bourbon, wine, stuff to eat. You come over about nine. I'm throwing a party. The more we get for the plate, the more people I'll invite."

"Fine," I said. "Okay."

"This is great," he said. He slapped me lightly on the back. He let out a short laugh. "We find commemorative silverware, we'll have another party tomorrow."

"Grits and Fritz salt shakers," I said.

"Seattle World's Fair gravy bowl," he said.

I drove Joe back to the office. The plate rode on his lap. I returned alone to the Vine Street property. I discovered it was fairly impossible to use the shovel and hold a bag open decently, so I laid the shovel aside. Working with my hands was harder, but I didn't mind. If Joe hadn't been here, I probably would've just thrown the point of the shovel at the Astrodome plate—breaking it to pieces without really knowing what I'd done. I was working more carefully now.

It was midafternoon when I heard a car pulling into the driveway. Bits of rock popped under the tires. I was still working in the bedroom and heard the front door open. I didn't rise from my crouch. If it was a burglar or somebody, they'd just stepped into their worst nightmare. After a moment, there was someone in the doorway of the bedroom. It was Shively. He was in the Lee Shively uniform, pressed white shirt, tan pants, shined boots. "This isn't dream work, I know," he said. He glanced around. "Where's Joe?"

"Wasn't feeling good," I said. "All this stink was giving him a headache."

Shively nodded. He looked apologetic, different from the way he was before. Maybe this room and what was in it was working on him. "When I stopped by here a couple of nights ago, I couldn't believe it," he said. "She kept this house so nice." He leaned against the door frame.

I was resting my hands on my thighs. "Something must've provoked her," I said.

Shively let his eyes roll across the garbage.

"Did you know the woman who lived here well?" I said.

He glanced at me, the look on his face indicating I'd asked an in-

appropriate question. "I know all the people who rent from me," he said. "What they do for a living, how much they make, if they're having financial trouble. Kid needs braces, daddy's gone off to AA. The rent's late, I get all the stories." He watched me evenly. "Just checking on my property." He looked at one corner of the room. "This whole damn thing is going to need a scrubbing, a new coat of paint, new carpets. Just a write-off, the entire thing."

It was an odd thing, but I thought something about Shively then, that somewhere along the way he'd found a bad set of instructions and was used to following them. Here I was cleaning up what Sophia had done, but there was nothing about it that made me want to forget her.

What I said was, "It's not that bad."

Shively's face seemed stern and he stepped back from the door frame he'd been leaning against. "Tell Joe to take some Tylenol and get back to work. You ought to be through with this tomorrow. I've got sagging gutters over on Rollins." He turned and walked out. As he went, it sounded like he was trying not to step in something.

I stayed in my crouch for a minute after his car pulled out. I held my hands together.

When I'd gone into Sophia's bedroom that afternoon we'd spent together, she was naked except for a slim silver chain holding a St. Christopher medal around her neck. The curtains were drawn. I started taking off my clothes. Sophia sat on the edge of the bed and I walked over to her. "Kneel," she said. I did. My eyes were level with her breasts. She brought the back of her hand to my forehead. "You're sweating," she said. She leaned closer and blew softly on my forehead. She moved her lips past my face to one collarbone. She blew on that. She did the same to the other.

It had been an unexpected moment—extraordinary. And I thought now that she was someone who understood things. She might be a real survivor. I didn't think I was being pie-in-the-sky imagining things turning out all right for her somewhere.

I decided to knock off early. I set the bags I'd filled outside the

bedroom door. I went outside and got in my pickup. I rode over to the 427 Bar. The regular bartender, Mitch, was there. "Where's your friend?" he said, after I ordered a shot and a Coors.

"Day off," I said. "Day off for everybody."

"Not me," he said, wiping out a glass that already looked clean. I shrugged. I had two more rounds and we watched a soap on the bar television. Then I drove back to my duplex. I laid on the couch and closed my eyes.

When I woke up, it was almost dark out. I went to the bathroom to brush my hair. I walked to the refrigerator and made a sandwich. I thought I heard some rummaging coming from Margaret Ellison's side, some light movement back and forth. I'd been getting used to the various sounds coming from there, but I felt more alert now. She was a fairly old lady and I guessed staying busy all the time was a real trick, the one that mattered most.

Then it was time to ride over to Joe's and see how he'd made out with our plate. Joe lived over on Wagner Terrace, in an apartment complex called Juniper Oaks. Juniper Oaks was actually two large, squarish, brick buildings, which contained twenty-two living units apiece. There was a large parking lot between the buildings and it was poorly lit as I pulled in. Silhouettes of a pair of empty picnic tables were next to one building.

Joe lived in 12A. The parking lot hadn't looked crowded at all, but as I stood in front of Joe's door I heard soft music and people talking inside. I guessed he'd found a buyer for the plate. I knocked on the door, and when it opened, Joe was standing there like a proud father. "I told you it was worth something," he said. He held the door open further.

Cross-Country

I met Marty, all five feet two inches of her, at Ivy American Race Course up near Harrisburg. She was galloping horses for a trainer named Radosevich, by no means a job for the fainthearted. Marty's arms were like steel cables. She was twenty-six, eight years older than me. She'd been working at racetracks ever since she was sixteen. Her hair was the color of the red in a ripe peach.

At night, I liked to close my eyes and run the tip of my index finger over her palm. It was like she was wearing leather gloves.

"You can't be that tough," I'd say. We'd both laugh out loud.

I'd been at Ivy American for five months. I had graduated from high school without giving college a second thought. I hadn't even wanted to finish high school, but my mother's eyes would get a certain look to them whenever I talked about quitting, so I stayed in, ran track, had a chair in detention named after me.

Ivy American was a real bush joint. I grew up in Nolan, West Virginia, and when we were seniors my buddies Clete and Ted and I hung out at Powell Downs there. The place was loaded with gamblers and women in leopard pants. I got a job back at the barns during summer vacations, working as a groom. I wanted out of Nolan. My dad and

grandpa and Clete's dad had all worked in the steel mills. There wasn't much left of them anymore—the mills, I mean.

After graduation, I got on with a trainer, Gil Willmutt, and when Powell Downs closed for the fall he shipped his horses to Ivy American. Willmutt trained horses by sitting in his car all morning, tipping a pint of vodka. He was crooked, so he did win a lot of races. He paid the help on time and once in a while brought a case of I.C. Light to the barn for us.

I met Marty at Willmutt's barn. She'd finished her morning work for Radosevich and was checking around, trying to pick up some freelance work. She tapped on Willmutt's window and he rolled it down. I was standing ten feet away, hosing the sore ankles of a seven-year-old gelding named Mr. Trips.

"Got anything I can get on?" Marty said. She grinned.

Willmutt laughed. "We're about done here," he said. "I can put you on something tomorrow, something with a nice long stride."

"I'll check back," she said.

"You do that," he said.

She turned and started to walk past me. "What are you staring at, homegrown?" she said. She was still grinning.

Marty got on a horse for Willmutt the next morning, one of the ones I looked after, a mare everybody just called Odie. I had the horse all tacked up and was standing with her in the stall.

Marty appeared. She said, "Do all women stand that still for you? Bring that horse out here and give me a leg up."

Later that morning I was hosing Mr. Trips' ankles again and Marty came towards us sitting atop a fat sand-colored pony. I'd been thinking about Marty already. Groom's work—cleaning stalls, looking after a horse's legs, raking the shedrow—was something you really didn't have to think about while doing it. It left your head clear for anything.

Marty stopped the pony a few feet away. "Where're you from, anyway?" she said.

So we started up right about there. After a couple of weeks, I moved out of my room at the track dormitory and into a by-the-week motel with her. It was called the Greyhound and was a race trackers' place: forty-five dollars due every Monday, one ice machine, basic cable. Marty had a ratty Mustang; she delivered me to and picked me up from Willmutt's barn every morning. We'd go back to the Greyhound and get under the sheets for a while. We'd go to the races in the afternoon or she'd help me with feed time at Willmutt's barn when it was my turn. Then she'd drive us over to T.G.I. Friday's or The Spaghetti Ranch and we'd drink two-for-ones and fill up on chicken wings and fried cheese sticks. The lights in our room at the Greyhound would burn late while we smoked dope and drank all kinds of liquor.

There were some things I learned about Marty right away: she liked talking about music, she was from Detroit, and she didn't plan anything more than twelve hours ahead. I'd get carried away and start going on like, you know, we ought to get us an apartment together or pool our resources so we could have a decent car, but she'd hold up her hand right away. "None of that shit now," she'd say. "You got to learn that, homegrown."

There was one rule to racetrack relationships: you grew tired, you moved on. Marty knew somebody who slept on the backseat of a friend's Monte Carlo. "I want to feel bad for him," she said, "but he's always like, I'm happy, I don't give a shit. Free as a bird. I guess I envy him mostly."

There was a drug dealer named Lamar who lived in room 16 at the Greyhound. He broke Marty and me up. He was some stringy bastard that stepped out of an old Springsteen album jacket, washed-out blue jeans and all wide-eyed. He moved into 16 and word spread fast he was the man to see on those quiet afternoons. I went to 16 the first time by myself to check out the merchandise. I'd done the negotiating for earlier pot deals with the nickel-dimers who hung around the track kitchen. Man of the family, you know.

The first time Marty met Lamar was by the ice machine. They were

both refueling—she and I'd been working on a fifth of Ambassador vodka—and Marty reported she thought Lamar seemed okay. She started going to his room with me. An alarm should've gone off the first time she said, "No, no, you stay here and watch Letterman. I'll run over to 16."

We'd return to the motel after morning hours at the track and she would disappear. It was like opening a box, finding a smaller box inside, and continuing the process.

One afternoon she came back from 16 and sat on the edge of our bed. "Gotta go," she said. "Time to go." I was like, Marty, this guy just keeps getting you stoned, that's all he'll ever be able to do. "You don't understand," she said. And she was right.

I stayed in our room—28—though. I paid the forty-five bucks a week and waited. It was torture, but going back to the dorm would've been worse. And I was pretty sure she'd get tired of Lamar. He had one trick. His kind never lasted.

In the middle of April, Willmutt got all his help together and told us he wasn't going back to Powell Downs for the summer. Greener pastures elsewhere, he said, which meant he'd fucked somebody over at Powell and they were laying for him. Alabama's the ticket, he said. Birmingham. You all work hard. Anybody who wants, has a job there with me. He started pointing. You coming? Jimbo nodded. T-man nodded. He pointed at me. I felt air coming into my body. I nodded.

I went back to raking the shedrow. What did I know about Alabama? Lynyrd Skynyrd, Rebel flags, home of the Crimson Tide. It was a place to go.

I tried talking about Alabama with Marty. Once, I caught her by the ice machine. I had the door of my room partway open and was looking for her. I came out and said, "I'm going down South."

"Great," she said, "all the barbecue you can eat."

"What about you?" I said. "You ought to come with me."

She dipped her square plastic bucket into the vat of cone-shaped cubes. "Lamar's waiting for me right now," she said.

That night I drank a couple of Olde English 40-ouncers and wound up pounding on the door to room 16. Lights came on next door. Lamar finally answered his door, stood there all dazed in his little tangerine bikini shorts. "Cool it, you stupid fucker," he said, too tired to whisper.

"I want to talk to Marty now," I said.

The next door down opened. There was some Mexican guy standing out there.

"Fuck off," I said.

He smiled and rubbed his hands together like someone who saw a solvable problem.

Then Marty came out from behind Lamar. She was in a long T-shirt. "Why are you doing this shit?" she said. "Why don't you just bring the cops with you next time because they're sure to come." She looked at the Mexican fucker. "It's okay," she said. "Domestic dispute." He looked at me again and went back inside, closing the door behind him real slow.

Lamar laid a hand on Marty's shoulder. "Talk to him," he said. "Quietly. I need to get some sleep here."

Marty shut the door partway and crossed her arms. "Go back to your room," she said. "Forget about this. Don't do this shit to me."

"What color panties are you wearing?" I said. "Tell me."

"Fuck off," she said. "Go fuck yourself."

The next afternoon Lamar was at my door. My head was tight—those forty-ouncers made you pay. I didn't give a shit. If he wanted to go at it, step outside and roll in the dirt, that was fine with me.

He tapped his forehead with his fingers. "Man," he said. "Can I come in?"

"Makes no difference," I said.

When we were in the room together, he put his hand to his belt buckle. I imagined something serious, a switchblade or something, but when he brought his fist up, there was a dime bag in it. "Here you go, daddy," he said. "Let's all try to get along now." Lamar was a year or

two older than me. Marty liked us young boys. "No reason for pounding on doors," Lamar said. "Go ahead." I didn't reach for the baggie. He shrugged and tossed it on the bed.

A week before Willmutt was going to ship us to Alabama, I was sitting in a chair by the window inside Marty and Lamar's room. The curtains were drawn, but they were the stiff, cheap kind, so I could see a sliver of outside if I tilted my head back. I needed to look away from time to time because Lamar and Marty were on the bed together. This was typical. Ever since I'd pounded on the door that one time, they'd always made sure to be touching or looking all syrupy whenever I came over to make a buy. This was payback. But I wanted to see Marty and I wanted her to see me. It wasn't easy to stay in control of myself.

This time Marty and Lamar were atop the covers, hip alongside hip, holding a *Spin* magazine between them. Another guy, Kirk was his name, was propped up in a chair beside the bed watching *The Price Is Right,* which was turned up pretty loud.

Lamar was waiting for a drop-off. He was dry, out of everything, but that was all about to end. A kid jockey, Tommie Impresica, who Lamar helped through a big-time losing streak with free black bombs, was making the favor up to him. Tommie Impresica shook off that losing streak and wound up with a job as a contract rider for a stable heading for Philadelphia, which guaranteed him a Heineken and fried shrimp life for a while. A couple of days ago Lamar had talked to Tommie and told him it was Death Valley here. Tommie said he'd take care of it.

I'd been sitting in Lamar and Marty's room about an hour. Lamar told me he was tapped of everything and I said I'd come back later. He said, "No, no, Wally Cleaver, stay here and wait with us. You can see what Santa Claus looks like." I said okay to that, but two or three times I felt like jumping up and walking out. They acted like I wasn't even there and I guessed that was the point.

The guy we were waiting for was likely to be a friend of a friend,

some delivery boy so far down the food chain a rat could swallow him whole. Marty and Lamar had spent the last five minutes arguing about who sang "Refugee." Kirk occasionally called out a number, guessing at the price of a microwave or a Mercury Sable.

Marty said The Black Crowes did "Refugee."

"No, babe," Lamar said. "It was The Kinks, I believe."

"How's it go then?" she said.

"Da-da-da," he said. "No, wait."

I could've cleared this up quickly for them. When I was in high school, our house had a nightly ritual: Pop sat downstairs in his saggy cloth chair hitting the Old Crow, Mom worked her crosswords at the kitchen table—something she said made her sleep better, though nothing really ever seemed to cure that—and, legs aching and heavy from the afternoon's track practice, I'd lie awake and listen to "The Music Professor," Jim LeMonica out of Wheeling. He was up-to-date. He'd play a song and talk about it afterwards, like each one really meant something. He'd tell about the guys in the band, maybe even what they were thinking about when they wrote it. He'd get guys from old bands like Procol Harum or Steppenwolf on the phone. One night he talked to Debbie Harry for forty-five minutes, like they were old pals. She said Blondie just started out as something to do, fashion, you know, Jim. I kind of miss it now.

Here were the facts: "Refugee" was Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. The Black Crowes had a song called "Remedy." I didn't know what Lamar was thinking about with The Kinks. They had "You Really Got Me," but that was a good ways from "Refugee." See, this was my point. Lamar was an okay guy probably, just trying to glide through like the rest of us, but the boy didn't know the time of day.

In the crack between the curtain and the wall I saw a Federal Express truck making its way slowly across the motel lot. Right away, I got a feeling in my stomach. The van slowed even more and pulled into a slip across from this room. No racetracker I ever heard of got a FedEx package. It took the driver a moment to get out. He had a

shoebox or something under his arm and was coming this way. It seemed like the back doors of the van burped open. I couldn't see what was behind them, though I didn't need to.

"Cops!" I said.

Lamar slapped the *Spin* on his legs. "Not cool," he said.

"Marty," I said.

She looked at Lamar and touched his arm.

I was out the door and somebody was yelling and steps whisked on the pavement. Somebody was after me, but I'd done some cross-country in high school and knew how to scooter. Coach said I had good instincts and I ought to think about a scholarship. Real runners required discipline, were as serious as hell.

The cop behind me lost ground after the first hundred yards. We were moving along small grassy hills beyond the motel lot. In the distance, a strip mall faced Route 12. There was a massive Buy-and-Bag at one end of it.

"Stop!" he said. The sound of his feet ended. "Last time!" he said. I didn't think he had a gun out; if he did he'd have to fire it because I was feeling crazy and didn't want to slow down.

I went three or four hundred yards before reining myself in. I tried to swivel my head and had to ease up more to do that. I dropped to a walk. There was that FedEx van and two cruisers on the motel lot. A dot of a man was walking back towards them; he was the one who'd been chasing me. The lot had people milling around. I looked for Marty's red hair. Maybe she was already in one of the cruisers. Goddamn, I thought. I'd hollered for her and she'd reached for him.

I turned and started running again. I angled off slightly to the right, aiming for the strip mall. I tried to imagine if anyone from the lot was watching, if they'd already ordered a man over to the mall to wait for me. I slowed. I was out of shape and my lungs were beginning to smolder.

From the back, the mall was all delivery ramps and dumpsters. I could see the very top of a glinting marquee; they had a little duplex

theater there. Marty and I had seen *Jurassic Park* at that dump. I walked all the way around the far side of the building and when I got there I stuck my head out from the corner. There weren't any cruisers in the parking lot. I didn't know if these cops were hammerheads or poster boys for bagels and cream cheese. The one who chased me had given up pretty quick.

The theater was the place to hide, though I was wondering if it was too obvious. I went past the carpet wholesaler, the Shoe Nation. I tried to even out my breathing a bit. How much trouble was I in? Fringe trouble, major trouble? Who was everybody pissed at, murderers, child molesters, dope-smoking grooms?

I opened a glass door to the theater entrance and brushed my hair over with my hand, hoping it looked like I'd been doing anything but running. There was a kid my age at the ticket counter who, other than saying "Five-fifty," didn't acknowledge that I was alive. I paid with the ten I'd taken to Lamar's room to buy that dimer. The carpet in the lobby was shaved and smelled like ashes. I took my ticket and disappeared into a dim hallway. Look at me, I thought. Freaking Lee Harvey Oswald.

I found a seat in the side aisle all the way over by the wall. I slid down low and tried to pay attention to what was on the screen.

As it turned out, I'd bought a ticket for a Stallone movie. He was hanging from a cliff by his fingertips, staring a long way down at a rock bed and pretty shallow-looking creek. I really didn't like Stallone. I'd seen *Rocky* a few times; it was about the only movie where he had his shit together. He wore a porkpie hat, drank from a bottle in a brown paper bag, and had a girlfriend who gave him a cool dog for his birthday. He got beat by Apollo Creed, but I was really pulling for Stallone in that one. After that, he turned into Mr. Kickass, an I-want-to-pose-naked-for-all-humanity type.

Watching him now, I thought, go ahead and fall. See if anybody notices.

Then it hit me. That stupid freaking jockey tried sending Lamar

drugs by Federal Express. Somebody at FedEx figured it out and got the cops involved. I slapped the armrest. Idiot jocks. If they weren't good for riding racehorses, we'd feed the lot of them to the crocodiles. I tried to guess how many laws had been broken. I imagined Lamar was going to jail. Kirk, maybe. Marty was just the girlfriend. I could testify to that.

After a few minutes I felt restless and decided to poke my head out and see what things looked like in the lobby. There was nobody out there but the concession girl, who was sliding her arms into the popcorn bin and raising them slowly like they were in sand and she was on a beach somewhere. I went back to my theater and sat down. Though it seemed like I was safe, I wished there was a better movie to see.

I've always liked movies, too much probably: the first time I was ever in love was with Jessica Lange in *King Kong*. After that, I tried keeping up with her, checking out her movies whenever I could. Not any stalker shit, just tame love. Even though she'd play a lawyer or a farmer's wife, she'd be beautiful old Jessica Lange to me.

People said real life was different from the movies, but as I sat there and watched that terrible Stallone thing, I thought, how? Up there, he's Stallone. What's he in real life, a brain surgeon? If I saw Jessica Lange walking down the street one day, what, I wouldn't be in love with her anymore? It all counted, it all was real.

That was the reason I quit track. The one time I won a big event was the Grove City Invitational, when I beat Foster Hrbek, one of the best runners in the state. The Grove City was held at Marley Park outside Huntington. The path the runners followed circled barbecue grills and little trailer courts. Foster Hrbek opened a big lead early, but I started gaining on him with a mile to go. I caught him fifty yards out; it sounded like I'd punched him in the stomach when I went by. I didn't know what had gotten into me that day, though the truth probably is that if you run in enough races, sooner or later somebody's going to hang a medal around your neck.

After the race, Coach was all delirious and pounded my shoulders. His greatest day as a coach, right? I'd won and felt okay about it, though nothing like him. Winning was supposed to feel a certain way, right? Maybe that's why I had the powerjets going that one time; I really wanted to know.

So it wasn't the greatest feeling out there. All that meant was that it was time to check my other options. I was glad to be working at the racetrack. I just thought, man, don't ever get dull on me.

When I stepped from the exit doors of the theater, the sun was beginning to fall, though there was still plenty of light out. I was glad it wasn't my day to feed the barn; Willmutt would have my ass on a steak platter.

I felt like getting back to my room. If there was somebody in a blue uniform waiting for me, well then there that was. All I was doing was watching the goddamn *Price Is Right.* I ran, well, because somebody was chasing me.

I walked across the hills I'd run over earlier. I wondered what was going to happen to everybody. I didn't have a clue what Marty and Lamar were telling the cops. I didn't know what they could say, really. The package, no doubt, was addressed to Lamar. He could try saying, yeah, the kid that ran, he's Mr. Big. The cops could check my room. All they'd find would be a transistor radio and clothes in small heaps.

Marty would set the cops straight on me. I thought of her sitting in some interrogation room. "He's a kid, sure," she'd say. "We had a thing. It's all over now."

As I neared the motel lot I saw the door to room 16 was partly open. Marty's ratty Mustang was there, but that didn't mean anything. Lamar's Olds was there, too. It wasn't like the cops said, "Okay, everybody follow us down to the station."

There weren't any strange cars in the lot. I tried to imagine what the deal was here. Surely to Jesus word had gotten out the cops were

at the motel today. They wouldn't be so stupid as to sit in Lamar's room waiting for more customers to drop by, would they?

I felt myself heading for 16. I wanted to know what the hell was going on. Maybe this wasn't the greatest idea. I went up to the door carefully, then pushed it back. Marty was sitting on the corner of the bed. The room was an incredible mess, everything looked sideways and crazy.

She watched me. "They were looking for dope," she said. My eyes traveled all around the room. "Thank Christ for once Lamar was tapped," she said. Marty leaned forward and put her hands together. She held them in front of her knees. "You know," she said, "you probably saved our asses. When you took off like that, it blew their cover. They didn't have a chance to give the stuff to Lamar."

"Where is Lamar?" I said.

"Still at the station. Had an outstanding warrant. They're gonna set bail tomorrow."

"What's the warrant for?" I said.

"Parking ticket, multiple homicide," she said. She looked up at me. "Dealing, I imagine."

I nodded. "Can he make bail?"

"I don't know the answer to that."

"Come with me to Alabama," I said. I felt all tensed up. I knew it was time to start getting over Marty—it was a tide going out—but there she was again. "You can leave all this shit behind you," I said.

She looked around the room. It was almost as if she'd seen it for the first time and was considering how it got to be that way. Then she looked at me. "I can't do that," she said.

"You aren't his wife," I said.

"He's not a stranger," she said. "I know I'm not a *Redbook* cover, but I'd hate to think I walked out on somebody just because of a little trouble."

"Are you gonna marry him?"

She laughed abruptly, a rich, heavy cocktail party laugh. "Hell no, I'm not gonna marry him. I'm just saying I'm not the type to turn off her feelings." She exhaled a burst of air. "I'm a slave to them, I guess." She looked at me expectantly. "We've got that much in common, right?" she said.

"I guess," I said.

She smiled. "It's the best of all possible worlds."

"It's lucky for Lamar," I said. She laughed and I felt relieved. I was glad I could fall for somebody like her, even though we weren't going to wind up together.

"What happened to that other guy who was in here with us?" I said. "Kirk."

"They let him go," she said. "He wasn't involved with anything. Just disappeared into thin air." Marty looked to the floor. "We had some beer in here. I've actually made some of this mess myself."

"I bet a cop put it in the trunk of his cruiser," I said.

"Probably."

It was quiet. "Can I help you with anything?" I said.

Marty shook her head. "Nah. Lamar lives out of a grocery sack. Most of this stuff is mine. I know where it goes."

I nodded and turned for the door. I left it halfway open like it was when I came in. I passed the doors of other rooms, made the corner, and headed for mine. I'd left the door unlocked, thinking I'd only be gone five minutes. It was the same room with the same things: clothes in little piles, radio tuned to K105. I looked around for a minute, then tapped at my pockets, wondering if there was something to celebrate.

Saltwater

For a year and a half, my father was a pari-mutuel clerk at Big Chimney Park, a crumbling racetrack at the base of the Brushy Mountains in West Virginia. One night after the races my mother woke me up. "Put everything you can in one suitcase," she said. She was sitting on the edge of my bed, smiling in pale yellow light. She left the room and I pulled my suitcase out of the closet hard because I couldn't open the closet door all the way without bumping the bed. As I packed, I heard excited voices down the hall.

I put all I could in one suitcase, dressed, and stepped out into the hallway. My mother and father and a young, stoop-shouldered man were in the kitchen. My father saw me first. "Hey, son," he said quietly. He took a few steps in my direction and looked down at me. His wavy black hair was gray at the temples. I was thirteen, though my father had always spoken to me like I was considerably younger. "Hey," he said. The rims around his eyes were red and he smelled like he'd had a drink or two. "How would you like to go to Florida? That's where we're going now, Florida."

* * *

I sat on the couch and waited for my parents to come out of their room. The tall young man with the stooped shoulders sat across from me at the kitchen table. He stared at me for a minute before he said anything. "Do you know what's going on here?" he said finally. I didn't answer. "What's your name?" he said.

"William Cook," I said.

"Just like your dad's name, right?" He smiled. Then he shook his head and looked down at his feet. I had seen him once or twice before. He and my father both worked at the ten-dollar windows at Big Chimney. "My name is Tommy," he said. "But you can call me Uncle Tommy while we're traveling together."

In a minute my mother and father walked out of their room and down the narrow hallway towards us. My father was carrying a suitcase in his right hand and both of my mother's hands were around his free hand. She'd been crying. My father stopped two feet from the kitchen table. "All ready?" he said.

I stood up and Tommy did, too. My father looked around the kitchen. "This was a good house," he said. My mother's hands squeezed his.

"Shouldn't we go now?" Tommy said.

My father gave him a hard look. "I believe my wife might want to take a look around the living room one more time," he said. "We'll see you outside in a minute."

Twenty minutes later we were heading down I-19 with the top up in my father's light blue convertible. Tommy and I rode in the backseat. My father drove and my mother sat next to him, smoking cigarettes one after another. In half an hour we passed a sign that said Welcome to Virginia and my father turned on the radio.

"I'm hungry, Bill," Tommy said after a minute. I wanted to get out of the car, too. Tommy smelled sour and I didn't like sitting in the backseat with him.

"Good idea," my father said. "We'll stop and gas up, too."

We pulled into an Appalachian station off the next exit. Tommy

filled the car. My father didn't get out right away. "We're doing fine," he said to my mother.

"Too easy, Bill," she said. "This probably is too easy."

"I want to get out of the car," I said.

"Stay put," my father said. "You can get out at the next stop."

After Tommy got back in, my father paid the attendant and drove us down the road a half-mile to an all-night truck stop called Bernie Mitchell's. There were a dozen semis parked to the side of the glassed-in building, which shone brilliantly against the black mountains. My father bought ten ham-and-cheese sandwiches, a case of beer, a bag of ice, and a plastic ice chest from a display by the front register. The man behind the counter smiled at him as he rang up the bill. "There's nothing like being on the road, is there?" the man said.

"You know, that's right," my father said, smiling back and handing over a fifty-dollar bill. I knew there was nothing extraordinary about a fifty changing hands at a truck stop late at night; truckers and other all-night drivers carried big bills regularly.

I sat on the hood of our car and watched Tommy and my father stack the beer in the cooler, put in the ice, then lay the sandwiches across the top. The cooler rode between Tommy and me once we were on the road again. My father found a station out of Roanoke that played country music. "Rhinestone Cowboy" came on and Tommy smiled.

Every so often my father would reach back and hold his hand out for a beer or sandwich. If his hand was flat, he wanted a sandwich, if he curled his fingers like he would when throwing a baseball, he wanted a beer. Once, he turned to my mother and said, "You look very pretty to me."

She lit a cigarette and said, "Oh, Bill," but she liked it. When things were tense and my father was feeling excited, he'd say things like that to my mother and I guessed it was the reason she let us live the way we did. She turned and held her hand out to me. Her fingers were curled and she was smiling. She wanted to throw one, too. My mother

never drank unless she was with my father and he was talking sweet to her.

It was September then, the night felt warm, and I wished my father would put the top down. I wanted to sit in front between my parents. Tommy didn't have much to say. He chewed his sandwiches slowly and kept his eyes trained straight ahead.

We weren't far into North Carolina when we lost the station in Roanoke. I'd snuck a beer when I thought no one was looking and felt a little sick and drowsy. Tommy had seen me drinking from the beer can. It didn't seem to matter to him.

* * *

Tommy and my father had worked on the second floor of the grandstand. My father punched out tickets. People would come up and push big bills at him and call out a horse's number. Tommy was a cashier. Though we knew he wouldn't keep it for long, my father told my mother and me he liked the job and handling all that easy spending money.

My mother brought me to the races one night so I could see where my father worked. She'd gotten all dressed up and we walked the half-mile from our house to Big Chimney. Before each race, she and I stood in line at my father's window. When it was our turn, he'd punch out a ticket for her and she didn't give him any money for it. Then, she and I would walk to the outer rail and watch the race.

We lost the first race, and when we went back to bet the second, my father said, "Did you cash?"

My mother said, "That horse didn't win, Bill."

My father looked at me and winked. "Go on and cash it anyway, Ellie. Take it over to the man standing behind that window there."

My mother knew he was up to something and tilted her head. "Go on," my father said.

We walked over to the window my father pointed to and my mother slid the ticket to the teller. The teller there was Tommy, though we

didn't know him then. He pushed a ten-dollar bill at my mother. Once, when we actually did have a winner, Tommy gave us ninety dollars. My mother was so excited she gave me ten.

On the way home that night she asked my father about it. We were riding in the convertible with the top down on a cool night. I was wide awake, and it was near midnight. "Oh, I covered your tickets, Ellie," my father said. "I'm accountable for that. I just wanted the world to see my wife doesn't have to pay for her bets."

He turned and looked at me. We were at the stoplight between Big Chimney and our house. "Life generally doesn't work like that," he said, smiling. "Sometimes you need to slant the odds in your direction. Does that make sense to you, son?" He looked back to the road in front of him without waiting for me to respond.

* * *

My father and Tommy were up front in the car now and I'd just waked up and it was morning. I was in my mother's arms. She was asleep and held me loosely. The sun was edging its way up in the sky and my father was driving the speed limit. He held a cigarette in his right hand as it rested against the steering wheel. My father and Tommy spoke to one another between long pauses. I thought I could smell saltwater.

"We're in Florida," my father said, finding me in the rearview. Tommy turned around. He looked tired, like he hadn't expected the drive to be so long. I had the idea then my father had talked him into this. My father could do that, talk you into things you'd never imagine yourself doing. And here was Tommy doing the best he could to take it all in, what he'd done and what life was going to be like for him now.

"That was a good sleep you had," Tommy said.

"He'll be a good man in a pinch one day," my father said.

Tommy seemed to think about that. "I guess so," he said, still looking at me.

"Are you ready for some breakfast?" my father said, looking at me in the rearview again. He still seemed keyed up. He'd driven all

night—that much nobody had to tell me. When he got excited, that's where he wanted to be, behind the wheel. "We're going to pull over in a few minutes," he said.

I nodded. My mother hadn't stirred. I closed my eyes as we rode on. After a minute I felt the car slow and heard the turn signal ticking. I felt a hand on my head, stroking my hair.

"Where are we, Bill?" my mother said.

"St. Augustine, coming up," my father said.

"I believe I am a little hungry now," my mother said. She tapped me on the head. "I think I'd like to sit up."

I sat up and my left foot went in the cooler, which was on the floor behind the driver's seat. There were three beers floating in six inches of water. "You'll remember this day," my mother said.

My father pulled off the next exit that advertised gas. Tommy got out and stuck a nozzle from one of the pumps into the gas tank. My mother watched my father, who was over talking to the attendant. "You don't suppose he's going to hold this place up, do you?" she said, laughing suddenly.

Tommy turned quickly and watched my father. The attendant motioned like he was giving my father directions. My father nodded twice.

Tommy replaced the nozzle on the gas pump and started walking towards my father. My father took some steps in Tommy's direction and when they met, said something to him. They both returned to the car.

"Did you find a place to eat?" my mother said.

"We'll do that," my father said, "but we need to get Tommy situated first."

My mother looked out at the palm trees and the green grass on her side of the road. No one said anything as my father started the car and pulled onto the highway. After five minutes we reached a sign that said This is St. Augustine. There wasn't anything in the distance ahead

that looked like a town and what was in front of us didn't seem different from what was behind.

A few miles later, we did approach a town. It was just a couple of blocks of stores and restaurants and bars, nothing you'd go out of your way to find. My father made a right turn at a stop sign, drove a block, and took another right. He pulled into the lot of a white building that had a red sign and a white greyhound running in stride. There were three buses parked perfectly parallel to one another alongside the building.

My father got out and walked back to the trunk. I heard the trunk pop open. Tommy got out, stopped by the backseat passenger door, and said to my mother, "Well, I guess this is it."

She looked up at him and smiled. He nodded to me and went around to the trunk. I could see between the opening of the trunk lid and the car and I hoped to see my father and Tommy splitting up the money. They just talked. Tommy pulled out a suitcase. I guessed they'd already done business.

They headed for the white building; Tommy's brown suitcase seemed heavy at his side. My father and Tommy stopped at the front door of the building and my father put his hand out and Tommy took it. I guessed what was happening was something they'd both agreed to, though as Tommy walked through the doors I felt bad for him, not because his life was going to be like ours, but because he was going to have to do it alone.

We were on the road again and my father reached out and took my mother's hand. They seemed happier now that Tommy was gone. Maybe they thought he might do or say something suspicious or panic at some critical point. Also, two men traveling with a woman and a boy wouldn't have looked ordinary to some people. And when people see something that isn't ordinary they will watch a moment or two longer than they normally would, and maybe it would be in that moment we would do something that would give us away.

"I'm ready for something to eat," my father said, looking back in the rearview mirror again. "What about you, son?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

My father looked at my mother and squeezed her hand. "Do you know what I'd like to have this morning?" he said. She smiled and shook her head. "Pancakes," he said. "A big stack of pancakes."

As we drove out of St. Augustine, I wondered where Tommy would go, what he would do. I wondered what I would do if I was Tommy, what it would be like to be by myself waiting for a bus. My mother and father were riding in the front seat. The future was something I didn't think about much.

"I believe I am ready for some breakfast now," my mother said after we'd driven for another half hour.

"Let's get a few more miles clear," my father said. His eyes looked up into the rearview. "Are you thinking about those pancakes?" he said.

"Yes sir, I am," I said. And though I was hungry, I didn't mind if he drove for a while. Life was no better for him than it was at this moment and he was being extra cautious because he could afford to be.

* * *

We'd moved to West Virginia in the middle of the night from Margate City, New Jersey, where my father had worked as a hotel detective in a surfside hotel/casino called The Matchmaker. We'd lived in a small room in the hotel on the second floor overlooking the parking lot. I didn't remember much about it, only that my mother and I would go out and swim in the ocean with The Matchmaker in the distance behind us. Once, when we were walking back up the beach, I saw my father standing on the roof of the hotel with his hands on his hips, looking down at us. I begged my father to take me up on the roof with him the next time, but he laughed and said to get up there was a magic trick and you had to know how to make yourself invisible. My mother laughed when he said that. It was a secret they seemed to share.

One night my father came into our room at the hotel and lifted me off the roll-out bed I slept on. He and my mother were silent as he carried me down the back steps. A few minutes later I was sitting between them in the front seat of the convertible as we were heading out of New Jersey.

* * *

My father drove for an hour and a half after we left Tommy at the bus station in St. Augustine. During the drive my mother turned back to look at me twice and said, "We'll be there soon." My father was quiet now and I knew his moods came to him in odd ways. Sometimes when things seemed to be going best, he'd grow silent and wouldn't look anyone in the eye. He didn't seem to have any control over it.

We stopped for breakfast in a town called White City. There was a police car parked in front of the Sandpiper Grill, which was the name of the diner we finally pulled into. We'd seen a billboard advertising it a few miles back. Of the three of us, my father was the last to notice the police car in front of the Sandpiper. My mother said, "Bill," when she saw it, but my father was already pulling into the lot. He slowed the car and said, "Damnit." He pulled our car next to the police car. "It wouldn't look right if we backed out for no reason," he said to my mother without looking at her. "Everything'll be fine." My mother didn't say anything else, though she knew this wasn't a good spot for us to be in.

The three of us walked inside the restaurant and headed for the booths along the wall. There was a man and woman sitting at the counter and another woman sitting by herself at a table in the center of the room. A waitress came over and we ordered: my father and I pancakes with strawberries, my mother a poached egg and toast. After the waitress left, my mother lit a cigarette. "What are we going to do after breakfast?" she said, exhaling a thin trail of smoke towards the ceiling.

My father crossed his arms and leaned forward. He smiled at me.

"I thought we might go fishing," he said. "I mean real fishing, where we'd charter a boat and be out at sea for days. Maybe we'd catch a sailfish, then throw the captain overboard and sail to Belgium."

"I don't think Belgium has an ocean around it," my mother said.

"I bet it does," my father said.

"I think it does," I said.

"No, it doesn't," my mother said.

"There is an ocean there," my father said. "I've heard of men sailing right up to Belgium's doorstep."

My mother shook her head and I said, "I think it does." We all laughed.

The rest of breakfast went like that. After my father had had his second cup of coffee, he said, "I believe I'll go out and check the oil and water in the car. You pay, Ellie." He placed a twenty-dollar bill under my mother's plate.

My mother and I sat at the table for a few minutes. She'd glance through the window and watch my father, who was bending over the engine of our car. "So how do you feel about today?" she said, still watching him. "Do you feel optimistic?"

"I guess I do."

She smiled. "Good for you," she said. "I don't want you to be upset with us. I don't want you to blame your father for anything. He just has a rogue's soul. There are worse ways to be."

"I don't blame him," I said. My mother was good about taking the time to explain things she thought I should understand. My schooling had been sporadic. I knew she felt bad about it. In West Virginia, I'd been in the sixth grade at Oldenfields Elementary. When we'd arrived from Margate City my parents didn't have any school records for me, so the first elementary they tried to get me into in West Virginia turned us down. My father got the chaplain at the racetrack to write a letter saying our family was in transition, we were upstanding people, and my previous schooling had brought me to about the sixth grade. We tried the letter on Oldenfields and they took me.

Even though I was in school then, my mother felt like I was behind, so she spent many of our hours alone together telling me things I ought to know. She told me about Pavvo Nurmi, the great Finnish long-distance runner who had all of his Olympic medals taken away because he'd run in races where money had changed hands; about how my father, when they were first dating, used to tell her he was in training to be an astronaut; about how wide the city streets were in Toronto, which is where she was from. When she finished telling me something like this, she'd say, "There. I'll bet there aren't three boys alive your age who know what you do."

* * *

My mother and I stood up to leave. My mother left the twenty on the table. "Somebody's lucky day," she said.

I waited by the main entrance of the restaurant while she walked off to the bathroom. It was the first time I'd been by myself since we left West Virginia. This was just some grill in White City, Florida, I'd probably never be in again and I was ready to leave. I wanted us to be back in the car traveling together.

My mother came walking out of the rest room. She'd put on lipstick and was holding her head high. I thought she felt better. When she put on lipstick we all felt better. I held the door open for her and we walked out. She walked quickly and I kept at her side. But after we turned the corner, my mother stopped and put her hand on my shoulder. Twenty yards away, my father was standing in front of our car looking down at his shoes. A policeman in a dark green shirt and gray trousers was standing next to him. The policeman had his arms crossed and was saying something to my father. My father nodded, said something back. The policeman raised his arm at the elbow and pointed at my father. My father smiled and nodded again. Although my mother and I were standing where we'd stopped, I knew we should've kept walking like everything was normal. My father looked down at his shoes again and the policeman kept talking. When my fa-

ther looked up this time, he saw us, and, for a moment, locked stares with my mother. The policeman looked at us, too.

"Here they are," my father said, still looking at my mother. "Come over here, you two. I'm finding out some good places where we can go scuba diving."

* * *

My mother and father had a fight once we were on the road again. After the policeman got in his cruiser, my mother got in the backseat of the convertible. She watched the cruiser pull back on the highway and then she said to my father, "You take too many chances." And then she wouldn't speak to him, to either of us, for a long while.

Her silence must've troubled my father, for he was quiet himself for a time. The sun was high in the white sky and my father drove the speed limit. Saltwater was strong in the air. It was a smell I liked. I remembered it from Margate City.

My father turned to me and said, "Do you worry about how you're being raised? Is that something thirteen-year-old boys think about nowadays?" I shrugged and my father looked out over the highway. "I'm trying to find a better life for us," he said. "I don't see anything out there." He exhaled and looked down at the speedometer. "We're just going to have to act like everything is fine until I do." He looked at me again. "Do you understand that, or are you too young?"

When I didn't answer, he set his eyes back on the road again. I didn't feel like talking. My father looked in the rearview mirror, and after a second smiled broadly and nodded his head. Only my mother could make him smile like that. He must've said something she approved of. He switched his attention from the mirror back to the road.

He looked in the rearview again. "You know I didn't invite that cop over," he said. "He just came up and asked what our West Virginia tags were doing in this neck of the woods. I said we were on vacation." He looked straight ahead now and said, "That's the trick, isn't it?" He was feeling better. He looked at me. "Can you see that?"

"I guess," I said.

"Don't think you're worse than anyone else," my father said. "The more people act normal, the bigger crime they've committed." He paused and looked in the rearview again. "That should even things out for you."

It was quiet again for a minute. My father just watched the road. He said quietly, "Do you know what will happen when we get caught?"

"I think so," I said.

"You're not afraid of that, are you?"

"No, I'm not." I felt like being quiet then. I hadn't lied to my father. I wasn't afraid of being caught, I could hardly imagine it.

Eldorado

A couple of months ago I was awakened by a racket going on outside my room. I live on the second floor of a dorm behind the stable barns at Rollo Park. It's quiet back here at night. But this one time there was something going on, a car horn blowing, people talking loud. I stepped outside still in my underwear. Parked on the ground below was an old Eldorado, its headlights beaming through particles of dust. A man was hanging out the back window, beckoning to a woman standing by the door of her room. The driver blew the horn. A beer bottle sailed out one of the passenger-side windows.

There were other grooms standing outside their rooms on my floor. I called to one of them, "What's going on?"

The one who looked at me, Kurt, is about my age, nineteen. "I don't know who that is talking to the girl, Tommy, but that's Herbie Garrett's car. Herbie probably thinks he just won the fuckin' Derby or something!"

People here know Herbie's story. He's in his mid-fifties and had been retired from riding until this spring when he tried making a comeback. He galloped horses to get in shape, but once he was fit enough not many trainers wanted to use him in races. I asked the trainer I worked for, Earl Connelly, about it and Earl told me trainers

preferred employing younger jockeys because generally they're stronger and more fearless. An older rider had been involved in his share of spills and it did something to his riding courage.

On his comeback, Herbie did get a few mounts, mostly horses other jockeys wouldn't ride, and often found himself finishing last or close to it—on the caboose, it's called. But today he'd finally won a race. I'd already heard the rumors about it, that it was a fixed race and the other jockeys involved had made more money betting on Herbie's horse than Herbie did for winning.

That night I stood outside my room and watched the Eldorado ease away from the dorms. The woman had chosen not to get in the car and closed her door. The driver, I guessed this was Herbie, had a blonde sitting with him in the front seat. I couldn't see much else, only the people in the car laughing and waving at everyone who yelled at them to go the hell home to bed.

The stable area only has a couple of dim streetlamps and it was easy for me to follow the headlights of the Eldorado as it disappeared behind a barn, then reappeared a minute later. The car was just inching along and I thought this was because the people inside wanted the ride to last.

They came past the dorm again. By this time I was about the only one still outside. Herbie slowed the car and looked up to where I was standing. "Good morning and thank you!" he said. "Good morning and thank you!"

That winner was the only one Herbie had on his comeback. By the end of the summer he'd given up riding again and had taken a job as an assistant valet in the jock's room, a job where he looked after the locker area and made sure there were always plenty of fresh towels available.

But ever since that night, I really liked that Eldorado. I imagine having something to celebrate myself and waking up people at all hours in case they haven't heard the good news.

Yesterday Earl Connelly told me he was shipping his stable to Blue

Meadows, a track in the middle of West Virginia, about three hundred miles from here. He told me I had a job there with him if I wanted it. It would still be groom's work, cleaning stalls and looking after a half-dozen horses, but Earl said a new town is sometimes good luck for a person and he's not a bullshitter necessarily, so what he said did make some sense to me. I'm from New Tomaston, this city on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River, where you'll find Rollo Park. I've lived here my whole life and it feels like I've seen what there is to see, done what there is to do, and, let me tell you, it hasn't felt like much.

Connelly's plodders never looked so good to me as they did this morning when we loaded them on the trailers. Connelly had told me I could ride to Blue Meadows in one of the trailers if I wanted, but I said the hell with that and I'd see him in a day or two. Leaving my hometown, I'm not about to ride out stowed away like someone who doesn't want anyone to know he's going.

Now, I'm standing at the pay phone outside the track kitchen about to dial up this man I know, Roger Cleveland is his name. He's an old boyfriend of my mother's. Of course, there's a history involved here and I'm not sure about doing this, but I want to buy Herbie's Eldorado and Roger's the only person I know who has lending money.

It's not like he and I are strangers. Roger's the closest thing I've had to a father. My real one ran off when I was eight. After my father left, my mother worked at the cafeteria in the county courthouse and met some men she went out with once or twice. Roger was the first one she was serious about. They started dating when I was sixteen. Roger was a cop on the New Tomaston force. He was a smart man who liked to make my mother laugh. She'd wipe her eyes and say, "Roger, you're just priceless." On weekends he'd take me to the track or across the river to watch the Cincinnati Reds play. He taught me how to drive my mother's Mercury Cougar. There was a weekend where he took her to Monroe, Tennessee, which is where she was from originally, and she introduced him to my grandmother. When they came back, my mother had this serene look on her face—something no man I

knew of had ever given her—and I guessed before long the two of them would get married.

Then Roger got thrown off the police force. There was some type of investigation that revealed he'd been taking bribes from bookies for letting them conduct business in the neighborhoods he patrolled. Roger told us this was the biggest joke in the world: there wasn't a cop on the force who wasn't on the take in some way.

The cops aren't popular to start with in New Tomaston and everybody I know complains about them, saying they're crooks and nosebleeds. Roger told us he'd been fired as a public relations thing. Being a fall guy—well, it's just not as bad as you think, he said. After he got kicked off the force, Roger didn't look for another job. I wondered about this, but then one afternoon he and I were sitting in his front yard listening to a football game, Kentucky–Bowling Green, and a police car pulled to the curb. Roger went over to the car, then stuck something in his pocket. It must've been a nice roll of bills because it took a couple of pushes for him to get it all down.

Roger's getting thrown off the force did cause complications between him and my mother. My mother was not a person used to hanging around with saints, and the right and wrong of deals like Roger's was just the human race on average to her. But what worried her was that, because Roger was a policeman, he'd taken an oath and as things turned out had broken it as about as often as he shined his shoes.

My mother wound up moving back to Tennessee by herself. As she put her last things into the Oldsmobile, Roger stood on the sidewalk, arms out at his sides, laughing. "Come on, Martha," he said. "You're joking, right?"

This was last summer. My mother wanted me to come with her, but her hometown has one stoplight and more churches than Coke machines. Anyway, I was already eighteen by then and ready to try things on my own.

* * *

I see Roger at the track sometimes. Connelly will have a horse running and when I bring it over from the barn, there's Roger standing outside the saddling ring. It's odd to see him there, somebody you thought was going to play an important part in your life now standing around like every other clown looking for inside information.

Roger will get me off to the side, ask me how a horse is doing, and I'll tell him what I think. Then he'll ask about my mother, if she's been up to see me or if I've talked to her. I don't know what his angle is. He might still be in love with her or he might've fixated on my mother because she hasn't forgiven him, while everyone else probably has. He thinks they'll get back together, that's obvious enough. I know my mother and this is a fantasy, but it's not something I'm going to tell Roger about right away.

I gave him a 16 to 1 shot once, a horse of Connelly's that was just tearing the barn down he was so anxious to get in a race, and that horse won. Roger made himself a good chunk of money. He gave me a fifty-dollar bill the next time I saw him and told me to spend it on a sure thing.

That fifty, well, I couldn't tell you what happened to it exactly. I never hang onto money for long. Just too many terrific chances out there to spend it. I liked this one exercise girl named Sharon, took her out for drinks a few times, but her stable shipped off for Penn National last month. I've been out on some dates since, nothing memorable, and that's how social life is at Rollo Park: girls you don't want to know very well or ones that don't want to know you drifting in and out of your room.

I've stood here at this pay phone long enough trying to figure the best way to ask Roger for a loan so I can buy this Eldorado. Now that I'm leaving New Tomaston, I feel as if I'm on the verge of a victory of sorts myself. I imagine driving out of town in the Eldorado with all the windows down and the radio blaring.

I dial and after three rings Roger's on the other end. Middle of the

day, the man's sitting at home. Like I said, he doesn't need a job. "Hey," I say. "It's me, Tommy."

"Tommy. All right."

"Listen," I say, "I'd like to borrow some money."

"Uh-huh," he says.

"I got a job in West Virginia. Want to buy a car."

"West Virginia?" he says. "You've taken a track job, I guess. I told you about that. It's dead-end. You'll wind up with nothing to show for it but rotting teeth and a bad outlook."

I want to say, yeah, and it's getting me the hell out of here, but what I do say is, "Well, I'd really like to buy this car."

"What's your mother say?"

I'm ready for this one. My mother doesn't even like to hear his name. If he tries to call and check out my story, my guess is she'll hang up before he completes his first sentence. "She suggested I call you," I say.

"I see," he says. The line on his end grows quiet. "You're not bullshitting me now, are you?"

"No," I say. "I'll give you her number in Tennessee." I hold my breath. There's always Greyhound.

"Nah," he says after a moment. "Let's you and I try to do something she'll like. Let's do exactly what she wants so she knows it's possible. Then we'll call her together." He pauses again. "I'll want to look at this car first. When do you want to do this?"

"Tomorrow," I say. "I can meet you on North Boulevard in front of the track. Around noon, okay?"

"See you then," he says and hangs up.

I stand at the phone for another minute. The call went fine, though in a better world Roger could just loan me the money as opposed to having him check out the Eldorado himself. When I go to see Herbie today, I'll want to have the price set, so when I leave the deal is pretty much done. That way, Roger can't come in there tomorrow saying the

car isn't worth that much or we're not going to pay a dollar over whatever and the whole thing gets messed up.

I think about calling my mother. I don't want to talk about anything that has to do with Roger, but I'd like to say hello and tell her I'm moving away from New Tomaston. I haven't seen her in months.

I dial the number in Tennessee, tell the operator it's a collect call, and wait as the phone rings on the other end. My mother answers and when she hears my voice she says, "Are you okay?" She sounds good and I'm glad I decided to call.

"I'm fine," I say. "I'm moving to West Virginia tomorrow. I wanted to tell you. I have a job waiting for me at a track called Blue Meadows. I'm going to buy a car before I leave."

"Tommy," she says, already breathless, "that's so wonderful." She speaks to someone in the room with her. "Your granmomma thinks so, too. You know, we were just talking about you the other day and I told her you were a survivor and had a good sense of where the trapdoors were in life."

"Well," I say.

"So what kind of car is it?" she says.

"An Eldorado," I say.

"Fancy," she says. "Are you the president of a company already?" She's laughing and I'm laughing because she's laughing.

"It's an old car, Mom," I say. "Used."

"It sounds wonderful," she says. "My son's getting his first car. You don't know what a relief it is to hear your life is working out so well. That's gold to a mother. It's better than a million dollars." She laughs again. "You're not going to tell me you have a million dollars for me, are you? Is that next? Did I ever tell you about the first time I drove a car? My daddy's truck. I think I was fifteen." She goes on for a time. I'm happy to listen. She talks about her life in Tennessee now, about how it seems like she's a little girl with her mother there looking after her. She never mentions Roger and when I hang up I feel relieved.

I walk out to the main road by the track, North Boulevard, and stroll the seven blocks to the Harrison Motel, where Herbie Garrett and a lot of other racetrackers live. Sometimes I'll be walking by the Harrison on my way to buy cigarettes or beer at ABC Liquor and there'll be the Eldorado parked in a side lot of the motel.

The Eldorado's there now. It's an old navy-blue baby and in daylight it's easier to see the corrosion around the doors, the crack in one of the passenger-side windows. I guess I could feel disappointed to've wanted it in the first place. Still, the way I look at it, the fact this car isn't perfect means its owner would be that much more willing to part with it.

And worn looks can be misjudged. Things with rust can still hold a good memory.

The parking lot at the Harrison is nearly full. The races don't start for another couple of hours yet. The Harrison is a ground-floor motel and the rooms are laid out in a square M configuration. I knock on the door, room 26, directly across from where Herbie's Eldorado is parked. I'm hoping Herbie remembers me from the night he drove around the barns.

It isn't Herbie who answers the door, but some spike-haired kid about my age. He's carrying a powder-blue phone in his right hand and has the receiver wedged between his ear and shoulder. He stares at me and I say, "Herbie Garrett." The kid snaps his arm straight out from his side and points to the room over.

I knock on the door to room 25. Someone's voice complains from inside. I knock again. The door opens in a minute and it's Herbie standing there, looking like he's ready to yell at somebody. A pair of feet with newly painted toenails and tissue paper between each of the toes sticks out from the end of the bed. Herbie looks at the feet, then pulls the door shut behind him. He's right at five feet tall and is wearing jeans, no shirt or shoes. His face is hard and cracked like dried clay and pale gray veins push up the skin in roadmap lines on his

forearms. He's holding a freshly lit cigarette between the index and middle fingers of his right hand. "What?" he says.

He doesn't recognize me. "I want to buy your car," I say.

"What?" he says.

"I work over at the track. I'm getting ready to ship to Blue Meadows and I'd like a decent car to make the trip."

"Blue Meadows," he says and laughs. "Why would anybody want to go there?" He leans against the door. "What are you, in trouble, kid? Need to change cars, get out of town?"

"I just like the car," I say.

He shrugs and continues smiling. "What makes you think this car will even make it to West Virginia?" I kick at the ground and when I look at Herbie again his smile has shrunk some. "What makes you think the car is for sale?" he says. "Do people look at me and say I've had it, everything's for sale?"

I don't know what to say to this. It's the truth, but I hadn't considered it as bad as he'd just made it sound. Herbie opens the door a crack and says into the narrow opening, "Hey, Sheila, I got somebody out here who wants to buy the Eldorado."

A woman's voice laughs from inside and says, "Sell, sell," and something that includes the word "anywhere." In a second the door opens wide and there's a woman a foot taller than Herbie standing there. She's wearing shiny green shorts and a halter top. She's slender, has short blonde hair, and a thin, wrinkled neck. She might be ten years younger than Herbie, though certainly no more than that. She stands balanced on her heels so her nails can dry.

"What's he offering?" she says.

"Nothing yet," Herbie says, turning back to me.

"Five hundred," I say. Both of them look surprised, though I can't decide if it's because they're thrilled or offended. "I'd like to test-drive it first," I say, not wanting them to think I'm a complete greenhorn. "Around the block or something."

Herbie smiles and says, "Oh, it'll do that. It'll go around the block just fine. I'd like to see your money first, see if you mean business."

"Herbie," the woman says, "I'm going back inside. I'm going to be listening from there. This is a kid you're dealing with and he doesn't seem to know a damn thing. And don't be all day, our soaps are coming on." She closes the door and between Herbie and me, I can't figure out who's more embarrassed.

He drops his cigarette to the ground, moves his foot like he's going to step it out, then realizes he doesn't have any shoes on. "Shit," he says. He looks at me and says, "Don't make an offer on something until you hear what somebody's asking, kid." He scratches his cheek. "That always sounds a little desperate, you know?"

There is a silence between us and I'm wondering if I should say something. "See," Herbie says, "you've already offered me five hundred, so I can't take anything less. I'd be a fool if I did." He leans his head against the door and raises his voice so Sheila can hear. "It's a good car!" he says.

"I'll bring the money tomorrow," I say.

"About this time tomorrow," he says. "I go to work soon, don't get off until seven." I nod and he takes a minute to look me over. "So you're going to West Virginia," he says. "How?"

"Hopefully in your car," I say.

"What road are you going to take, that's what I mean, kid."

"I guess I don't know that offhand," I say.

"You'll probably want to take I-62 and follow the river east," he says. "Once you cross the state line, head for Morgantown." He's brought his hands out in front of him in fists like he's holding a steering wheel. "It'll be all back roads after that." He swivels his hands like he's on the road himself now. "And there'll be mountains. Better be good to your car there. Don't ride the brakes. Use them, but don't ride them. And don't gun the engine trying to get speed up a hill. West Virginia. There's an automobile's graveyard."

The door opens and there's Sheila reaching for Herbie's wrist. Herbie clears his throat. He focuses on me and says, "You bring the money tomorrow and we'll have ourselves a deal."

* * *

I sit up in my room at the dorm adding up the events from this day and trying to figure how tomorrow will go. What was that Herbie said about Blue Meadows? Why would anybody go there? I was paying too much attention to the Eldorado deal. I hoped I wasn't getting obsessive about it. You get your heart set on the wrong thing and it can set a tone.

What Herbie probably meant was that Blue Meadows wasn't much different than Rollo Park. I could live with that. As soon as Connelly offered me the job, the first thing I thought of was: I'll take it; second, the Eldorado. After a while the things there might start looking like they do here. That's the thing about living in small places: when you see all there is to see, the only thing to do is to see them again. Maybe that's what I'll be facing for a while. Who knows? Staying in the same place isn't the answer to anything, might never be. I'm moving on and worried about this Eldorado, which I guess has to do with the fact I want my moving on to mean more than it's going to.

I start to worry about Roger, what's he going to say to Herbie. Roger will try to negotiate the price down from five hundred, that much I'd bet on. I wonder how much bullshit Herbie and Sheila will put up with. Roger is a man who likes to bargain.

When Roger came to the apartment on Calder Street where my mother and I lived, ready to tell us about being kicked off the force, he had a bottle of champagne with him. This looked sort of manic to my mother and when Roger kept babbling on about how everything was going to be fine, better even, she sent me out of the room. Our apartment was small and from wherever you happened to be you could hear most of what was going on. They talked about Roger going to jail,

about his pension, and when Roger kept laughing, my mother started to cry. She threw him out of the house that night. He'd stop by or call after that and she'd let him take me for the day occasionally. But things between them were over, that much was obvious, at least to me.

Roger had his picture in the paper a few times and there was talk about him doing some time, but the district attorney came out and said he'd gone over the matter carefully with the chief of police and losing his job was enough punishment for Roger Cleveland.

* * *

When Roger comes down the road towards me, I reach between my legs for the handle of my suitcase. I lift it as I stand. He eases his brown Chrysler onto the shoulder twenty yards away and brings the car to a stop ten feet from me. He's smiling, his thin brown hair combed over, his forehead shining in the sun. I pull the backseat door open and set my suitcase inside. I get in the front seat and Roger puts out his hand. He's a medium-sized man with a broad, tired face and is wearing a short-sleeve white shirt with collar buttons. He's got long fingers—piano player's fingers, my mother said—and it takes a moment before he releases my hand. He smiles, rests his arms on the steering wheel, and says, "So where's this great car you want to show me?"

"Down the road the other way," I say. "Not far."

He looks over his shoulder and makes a U-turn onto the road, heading for the Harrison. "So your mother recommended you call me?" he says, sounding satisfied.

"Right," I say.

"We're going to call her today," he says. "I'm looking forward to that."

"Actually," I say, "I guess I'm not supposed to tell you this, but she's coming here tomorrow. She's driving up to see me off. I guess she'll want to see you, too."

"When?" Roger says. "What time?"

"Afternoon," I say. I want to be careful here. Now that I've got this lie rolling I want to make sure it doesn't roll over on top of me. "It's a surprise," I say. "You'll have to act surprised."

He nods at this and seems thoughtful. "I knew she'd get sick of Tennessee," he says. He swallows and I can tell he's excited.

As we approach the Harrison, I point to a spot where Roger ought to pull in. I indicate the side lot where the Eldorado is parked. Roger stops the car and turns off the engine. "Which one?" he says.

"The Eldorado there."

He studies the car. "Goddamn that's an old model," he says. He looks at me. "This is the car you want?"

"I'm getting a good deal on it from a guy at the track."

"A gambler's going to give you a good deal?" he says.

"This guy used to be a jockey."

"Oh. Well," he says. He glances down at his lap and shakes his head. "That car is a piece of shit."

"You haven't heard the engine run," I say, though I haven't heard it in a while myself.

"Gas tank's filled with shavings and purrs like a kitten, right? Listen, Tommy, you got to watch who you do business with. I see somebody's going to have to teach you about that." He stares at the Eldorado again. "It's stupid to think a car like that will get you anywhere. Completely unrealistic." He laughs a little and starts up his car. "Just like you know who."

He drives to the motel lot entrance. "Listen," he says, "there's a guy who used to buy cars from the auctions. I don't know if he's still there, but he used to have a lot off Route 7. Say he's one hell of a mechanic."

"Mechanics use shavings, too," I say.

"It's got to be better than this," he says, pointing back with his thumb to the Eldorado. "I wouldn't loan you a nickel for that thing. Your mother would look at that car and think I'd lost my mind." He

eases onto North Boulevard. "You make your own money, Tommy, then you make your own mistakes. You're not going to do it with mine."

Roger drives and I don't say anything. I know I should've done something differently regarding him, but I can't figure out what it could've been. I want to say, "Look, my mother threw you out with last year's garbage," but where would that get me? I think about saying this to him and what the look on his face might be like. I'm quiet, though. I guess it's a bridge I'll burn when I get to it, if I get to it. As of this moment I've got one suitcase and a right thumb for hitching.

In a few minutes we're at this lot he's talking about. It's a gravel deal with about twenty cars lined up next to one another, facing the road. A gas station is adjacent to the lot: two pumps and a square, beige, one-story building. A man is standing over by the pumps.

Roger and I get out of his car and walk around. There's a coffee-colored Vega, a Celebrity with bald tires, a lime-green New Yorker with a dull red hood, a Duster without hubcaps, a Cordova with a torn canvas top.

The man who's been standing by the pumps heads for us. He's short with wide shoulders and is wearing navy-blue workpants and a bright red T-shirt. He's got short-cropped black and silver hair and seems irritated about having to walk over.

"Connie Tyler?" Roger says. The man nods. Roger puts out his hand and the man seems to shake with him involuntarily. "We're looking for a car here," Roger says. "What's the best you've got?"

"I don't know who you are," the man says. "Should I know you?"

"Roger Cleveland," Roger says. "I met you at the precinct a couple of times. You had a beef with somebody somewhere."

"You a cop?"

"Used to be," Roger says.

"Let me tell you about cops," the man says, nodding to me. "Every time I buy a car from these son of a bitches, something's missing when

I come to pick it up. On the auction block the car's got all its mirrors and gadgets. By the time I have it back to my lot here, all that shit's gone." The man eyes Roger again. "What about that?"

Roger's face is calm and he says, "I wouldn't know anything about that. I said I used to be a cop."

"Right," the man says. He looks over his cars and rubs his thick hands together. "Well, tell you what," he says, "I just tuned that Caprice up. I want you to ignore the eleven hundred it says on the back windshield because that was before I worked on it. The price I'm asking now is thirteen hundred-five." The Caprice is canary yellow and Roger and I both stare at it for a second.

"I'll even run it for you," the man says. He reaches in his pocket and takes out a key ring. He seems to have a key for every car in this lot and then some. He picks out a dull silver one and heads over for the Caprice. It's a fairly new model. The door whines as he opens it, but the engine does sound good. He gives it some gas, then puts the car in drive and heads for us. He stops fifteen feet away and the dust drifts towards me and Roger. The man sits in the car.

"Your mother will like the color of it," Roger says.

"She likes Eldorados," is what I say.

"Let me handle this," Roger says when the man finally steps out of the car.

The man walks up to Roger with his hands in his pockets. "You say you used to be a cop?" he says.

"That's right," Roger says.

"Hell, I recognize you. I thought you looked familiar." The man puts his hands on his hips and says, "Well, this is a different thing altogether. Since you're one of our noteworthy citizens, I'll take fifteen hundred for the car."

Roger smiles and shakes his head. He looks at me. "Do you see what's going on here, Tommy?" he says.

"He doesn't want you to buy the car, I guess," I say.

Roger nods. "Very good," he says. He keeps looking at me, though

he talks loud enough so the man can hear. "What's going on here, Tommy," he says, "is that this guy's trying to make me pay for something he thinks has been done to him. This guy thinks he's Jesus H. Christ." Roger nudges me. "This son of a bitch who makes a living off cars that used to belong to thieves and drug dealers. Wants to charge an ex-cop a little extra." He suddenly lowers his voice. "We're going to leave this lot with a car, maybe a few of them." He raises his hand suddenly and wipes something off the shoulder of my shirt. "Nobody's going to make me feel bad about something I've done," he whispers. "Feeling bad, that's up to me, got it?"

Roger straightens and looks at the man, whose face has been tightening all the while. "Fifteen hundred, right?" The man nods. "Where's the title?" Roger says.

"In the office," the man says. "But I might want more for the car now I'm thinking about it."

"No," Roger says. "You said fifteen hundred. You raise that fucking price one more time and I'll have some friends here in five minutes."

The man stares at Roger another moment and I hope he does anything but answer back. He turns and heads for the beige building. The man is getting the price he's asking, but I wonder who's getting the better of who here because that's what this seems to be about. Roger is over at the trunk of his Chrysler. He opens it and leans closer to the space. I try to imagine what's in there; I'm only a few yards away and he doesn't appear interested in having me come over. Roger pushes the lid down and walks to me counting money. He hands it to me. "Make sure I have this right," he says.

I take the money and start counting. The man is headed in our direction. He's twenty yards away when I say to Roger, "This is only five hundred."

Roger looks at me and grins. "Only five hundred, huh?" he says. He nods to the man, who has stopped near the fender of the Caprice. "Take it to him."

I walk the money over to the man and he hands me the title. He

begins counting the money and I turn to look at Roger and Roger's only standing a couple feet behind me now. As soon as the man finishes counting, he looks at Roger and Roger says, "We'll be needing the key." The man holds the money out, sticking it in the direction of Roger's face. Roger shrugs. "I had to make some reductions," he says.

"Fuck off," the man says.

"Step aside," Roger says to me. I do that and the men are only five feet apart. Roger holds up his hand. "Pay attention here," he says to the man. "I want you to understand what lucky feels like. You're lucky to have that five hundred, lucky it's that much. You're lucky I don't point that gun in my trunk at your goddamn head. You'll be lucky tomorrow if my friends on the force don't burn this fucking dump to the ground."

"You're full of shit, mister," the man says. He's still holding the money out to Roger, though his hand has dropped slightly.

Roger shakes his head. "You take that money and put it in your pocket or stick it up your ass and you better hope like hell this car runs good for the boy here. Otherwise . . . " he says, shaking his head again.

The man stands there for a moment, weighing his options, none of which seem good. I hope he takes a swing at Roger and knocks him to the ground. But he looks confused. I guess nobody'll be getting the better of Roger today. "He's not kidding, mister," I blurt out. Roger looks at me and nods his approval, though that's not what I was after.

"Why don't you pricks just start taking cars off the street?" the man says to Roger. "Save us all some time."

"We're working on that," Roger says.

The man stuffs the money in his shirt pocket, then takes out his key ring. He works the Caprice's key around, then flips it to me. "Don't you come back here," he says in a low voice.

"We might be back tomorrow," Roger says. "I need cars for the whole family. Give you fifty bucks for the Cordova, forty for the station wagon." He claps his hands together and turns to me. "Get in the car,"

he says. I do that and inside the Caprice smells like an oily rag. Roger says something else to the man, jabs a finger at him, then heads for his own car. The man stands still as we drive off the lot.

I follow Roger to a bar after that and he insists on buying me dinner. After we've finished eating, he digs in his pocket and pushes some twenties at me. "Here," he says, "a little gas money. Next time you're through, get me a tip on a horse and we'll call it even." He takes a sip from his glass of beer and leans back in his chair. "I think this turned out pretty good, don't you?" he says. He leans forward. "Where are we all going to meet tomorrow?"

I'm disgusted with everything and barely care about keeping this lie going. "What about right here?" I say. "Same time?"

"Where are you supposed to meet your mother?" he says, watching my expression closely.

"Pierpont Motel," I say. "Over on Timmons. That's where I'm staying tonight."

"Your suitcase is still in my car," he says, leaning back again. "I was wondering about that. It looks like you could be leaving tonight."

"You know what?" I say. "Fuck this." I reach in my pocket and drop the key to the Caprice on the table. "You mess with me about what kind of car I want, now you don't believe me, just the hell with this." I put my hands on the arms of my chair, ready to stand.

Roger pushes his hands forward. "Calm down," he says. "Calm down already." He puts his finger on the key and guides it back to me. "All I'm saying is that I'm trusting you on this, okay?"

* * *

So now Herbie Garrett's woman, Sheila, and I are sitting on the hood of the Eldorado, waiting for Herbie to bring the Caprice back. It's almost midnight, the sky is clear, ocean blue. Herbie's been on his test drive for more than an hour.

I'd been waiting longer than that in the motel lot. When I first arrived, the Eldorado was gone. I knocked on the door of room 25.

There was no answer. I got back in the Caprice and began dozing. Every time a car door slammed, I sat up. Finally, the Eldorado was back and Herbie and Sheila were getting out. They looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. They stood at the door to their room and I suggested the trade: Caprice for Eldorado. I pointed to the Caprice, reached in my pocket, then held out five of the twenties Roger had given me.

Herbie took one of the twenties, gave the rest to Sheila, and took the Caprice out for a drive. I'm worried the car has broken down somewhere, but Sheila doesn't seem concerned.

"So what'll you do," she's saying, "if the Eldo doesn't make it to . . . where was it again?"

"Blue Meadows," I say. I reach back and take out a bus schedule, which I picked up after I had dinner with Roger. I'd been driving around town, not ready to leave, when I passed the bus station and that was when I had the idea of making this trade.

I show her the bus schedule and she says, "That's good, hon. Maybe we all ought to carry those in our pockets." She lights a cigarette, drops the match to the ground below her feet where there's already a half-dozen butts burned to the filter. "So you're buying a car you think will break down?" she says. "Just so I have it straight."

"I guess so," I say.

She tilts her head back and exhales smoke towards the sky. "Men want unreasonable things," she says.

"I bet Herbie spends half the time just trying to impress you," I say.

She looks at me and says, "You're a sweet kid." She stares at me as if trying to understand something I might know about. Then she looks out to North Boulevard where the streetlights are shining and there's hardly a car on the road. "Herbie's over at Ryan's Pub, no doubt," she says. "Just around the block there. Probably telling all his friends about how he got this new car of his. In his story, you're probably the bad guy." She laughs at this and so do I.

"I don't mind that," I say.

She smiles and shakes her head. "Old Herbie," she says. She looks

at me again. "I've got an extra set of keys in the room," she says. "If you need to get going."

"That's all right," I say. "I'll wait." The truth is, I don't mind sitting here with Sheila at all. The Eldorado is right under me and it seems like we're the only people out here. When Herbie gets back, I'll be on my way and though I'm not afraid of being alone, that's fine, that's fine, it's nothing I'm going to hurry up for, either.

I hope my next car will be as good as this one.

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